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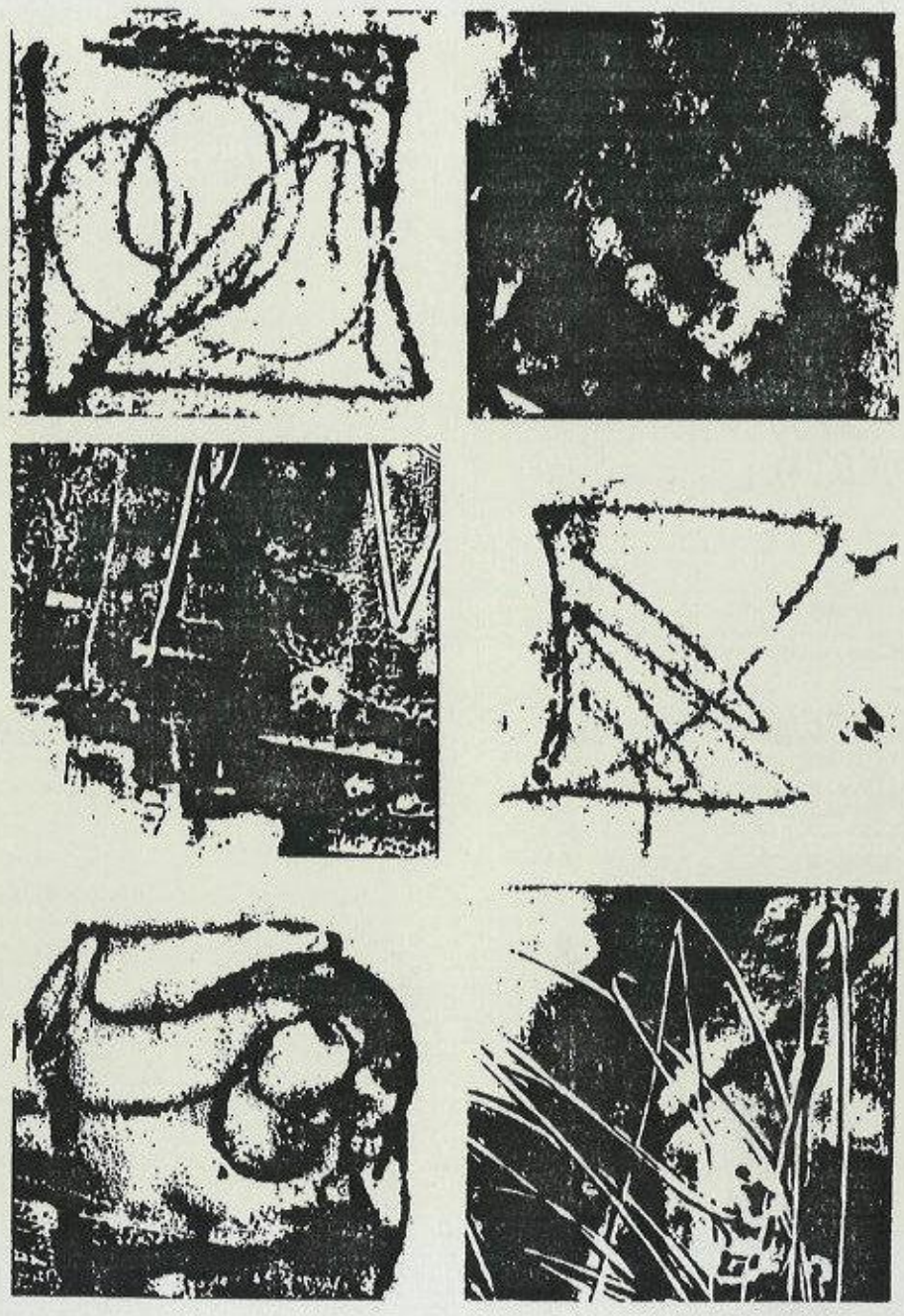
TURNING THE MUSICAL TABLE

Improvisation in Britain 1965-1990



Nick Couldry

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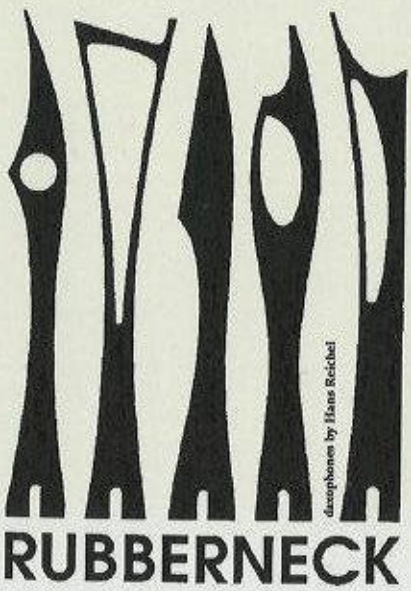

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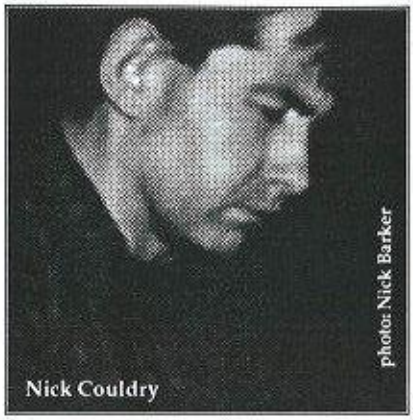

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Nick Couldry is keyboards player with London based improvising group Conspiracy. He became involved in improvised music in 1985 through Philipp Wachsmann's class at the City Literary Institute, London. In 1993 he co-organised and performed at Company Week; he also co-founded London's Secret Spaces which has organised collaborations between improvising musicians and visual artists in unconventional venues. His discography includes two solo albums, **Mouths Of Pearl** (1990) and **Sieve** (1991). With sculptor Crow, he is developing performance and sound work based at **The Institution Of Rot**.

Gina Southgate has been making real-time artworks in direct response to the sounds, energy colours and dynamic in live improvised music since 1988. Collaborating with musicians, she explores the sonic and visual potential of art tools and materials, thereby becoming an integral part of the music-making process.

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PREFACE (1994)

This essay, **Turning The Musical Table**, is a personal statement of why improvised music matters to me, and why I believe it should matter to others. I wrote it in late 1990 and early 1991 after I was asked out of the blue to contribute a history of British improvised music for an edition of **Contemporary Music Review**. This is one of the reasons for its academic style and format.

But there is more to its style than that. The recent history of improvised music has suffered from almost total neglect in *academic* music writing. Given the importance of academic credentials for licensing musical taste (I believe this goes well beyond the obvious example of 'classical' music), this neglect is of practical, not merely theoretical, importance. I decided in this essay to use academic argument to confront head on at least some of the assumptions which are responsible for academic neglect of improvisation. The essay is, then, a personal statement written against the grain of an entrenched academic position.

Turning The Musical Table is definitely *not* an attempt to write an authoritative history of British improvised music. (This is why I avoided including a formal discography.) At best, it is a sketch of possible starting points for such a history and, as I have just emphasised, this was only part of its aim. Even in this respect, I feel it important to see how improvised music weaves together *many* perspectives; how its revival is a historical phenomenon, a crucial one, but not one which makes sense in the reductive terms of most musical history.

It wasn't practicable to make more than minor corrections to the essay now without delaying this publication substantially. However, if I did rewrite it, there are of course things I would want to redress. First, I would want to deal more explicitly and in more detail with the contribution of women improvisors: for instance the history of Feminist Improvisors Group, the work of Maggie Nicols, Lindsay Cooper, Sylvia Hallett and others. Above all, though, I would try to deal with the sad fact that, however important (and often unacknowledged) the role of women has been in the history of British improvised music, disproportionately few of that history's major figures have been women — something that disturbed me long before I wrote this essay, but which I felt unable then to address properly.

Secondly, I would expand on the possible links of British improvised music, not just with jazz and classical music, but with other areas — experimental rock, industrial music, the visual arts (especially the sound experimentation so brilliantly explored in Dan Lander and Micah Lexier's book **Sound By Artists** (1990)). In particular, I would give more emphasis to improvisation that forces different styles of music together, which through the spread of sampling technology and the influence of, say, John Zorn, has in the 90s become more central than I realised.

Writing now, there would obviously be some catching up to do. There are British musicians whose importance is now clear but perhaps was less clear at the beginning of the decade. A crude list would be invidious but I've tried in the Appendix to list selected recordings from the 1990s which are a possible starting point for catching up on this history.

The early 1990s has also seen a small but, I hope, significant shift from the media neglect of improvised music that I complained of at the end of the essay. A television series entitled **On The Edge: Improvisation** (directed by Jeremy Marre; written and narrated by Derek Bailey), based on Derek Bailey's book, **Improvisation: Its Nature And Practice In Music**, was shown on Channel 4; BBC Radio 3 for the first time has begun to give improvisors regular (if limited) coverage as part of the musical map; in addition to **The Wire**'s continued coverage, other magazines for comment on improvised music, like **Resonance** and **Rubberneck**, have gained momentum. But the continued, almost total neglect (and ignorance) among the national press remains more typical of the general situation. Funding for virtually everyone working on the improvised scene remains very difficult in spite of the revival in the early 1990s of the London Musicians' Collective as an organising and lobbying force.

If there are reasons for optimism, they lie probably less with institutions and more in a general sense that *gradually* new musical territory is opening up: where the historic hostility or indifference of other ('commercial') musics to the sound worlds explored in improvised music is thawing out, where the old (usually silent) denigration of the 'merely' improvised is becoming more widely recognised for the irrelevance it has always been. Here perhaps lies the glimmer of the social and cultural changes necessary for the wider acceptance of improvisation, changes which the improvised scene could not possibly have achieved by itself.

Although I have used up a lot of words here, I want to stress that I don't believe that words can stand in for music. But lack of words (lack of a language for discussion) is a problem for any field of music that tries to survive in today's administered world. This is why the writings (not just the music) of Eddie Prévost and Derek Bailey are so crucial. British improvised music badly needs its history to be written, many histories in fact, from the personal to the academic. It needs more, better writing, more argument, more explicit, clearly formulated *dis*agreement.

I hope that the publication of my work in this form (made possible by the generous support of Chris Blackford, editor of **Rubberneck**) will provoke others to write from their personal perspectives, however critical they may be of mine.

Nick Couldry, September 1994

NOTES

(1) I have benefited greatly from the encouragement of Eddie Prévost, Adam Bohman and Andy Hammond and their detailed comments on an earlier draft of this essay. Thanks also to Nick Clarke for shrewd observations on stylistic matters, to Derek Bailey and Gus Garside for practical help in the early stages of preparing the essay and to Alan Durant for some penetrating comments in a late stage of its preparation. Last, but certainly not least, I must express my gratitude to Rachel Blair for her great accuracy and patience in typing the drafts of this essay.

(2) **Improvisation: Its Nature And Practice In Music** (Morland Publishing in association with Incus Records,1980). This book is an invaluable sourcebook for other improvisors' comments as well as a major work of theory. It is the touchstone of this essay. A revised and updated edition published by the British Library (1992) is now available. In addition to Derek Bailey's book (hereafter called **Bailey**), I have found the following particularly helpful: Michael Nyman, **Experimental Music: Cage And Beyond**, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974 (**Nyman**); Christopher Small, **Music, Society, Education**, John Calder, 1977 (**Small**), and Jacques Attali, **Noise: The Political Economy Of Music** (trans. Brian Massumi), Manchester University Press, 1985 (**Noise**) (particularly the final chapter).

(3) Luciano Berio, **Two Interviews**, Marion Boyars, 1975, pages 81-85.

(4) See Christopher Small's paper 'No Meanings Without Rules' delivered at the ICA in March 1984 and published by the Association Of Improvising Musicians with papers by Alan Durant and Eddie Prévost under the title **Improvisation: History, Directions, Practice**.

(5) At one limit, which is rarely considered desirable or approachable, a 'free improvisation' would use only those objects in the immediate environment where the performance was to take place: see the suggestion in **Creativity & Environment** by Trevor Wishart and Friends (1974). Derek Bailey's distinction between "idiomatic" and "non-idiomatic" improvisation while important does not necessarily help here, since some of the music considered uses idioms obliquely or in superposition or is clearly intended to be interpreted by reference to a particular idiom. Indeed in one sense 'free' improvisation can be understood as an attempt to develop 'idioms' or at least contexts for interpretation *during* performance: see Eddie Prévost's use of the term "mobile idiom" in his essay in the booklet referred to in Note (4), and compare my discussion below in the section headed **Space/Time**.

(6) Many have commented on the misleading nature of recordings of improvisations: for example, **Bailey**, page 122, Cornelius Cardew in 'Towards An Ethic Of Improvisation' (contained in the **Treatise Handbook**, pages xvii and xix) and John Cage's analogous comments in relation to works which are indeterminate as to their performance quoted in **Nyman**, page 9. For an acute example of the point, take **Circadian Rhythms** (Incus, 1980) which comprises a 45-minute extract from a 13 hour concert given over two days at the London Musicians' Collective in 1978 with Paul Lytton, David Toop, Max Eastley, Paul Burwell, Evan Parker, Hugh Davies, Paul Lovens and Annabel Nicolson.

(7) Compare the comment in a review by Keith Potter of various Incus records in **Contact** No. 19, Summer 1978, pages 32-37 at page 33.

PART ONE
Introduction

Improvisation requires no defence (Note 1). It is something people do, as they always have, because it meets needs not satisfied in other aspects of musical practice. It is a great merit of Derek Bailey's book (2) that it puts this fairly and squarely.

In spite of this, distinguished composers have seen fit to attack or denigrate the practice of improvisation (3) and (less surprisingly) improvising musicians have devoted much time to its defence. Why? The interesting reason, perhaps, is that the practice of improvisation is implicated in a group of issues which have seemed unavoidable to many actively involved in music in recent decades: namely, what is the proper relationship between the activities of composer, performer and listener. More precisely, the conventional formulation of that relationship amounted to a repression of the improvising impulse. Recent improvisation may therefore be seen as a response to that repression.

Part Two of this essay is a sketch of developments in improvisation in Britain in the last 25 years. In this essay I mean by 'improvisation' the area frequently called 'free improvisation'. Since no music is independent of constraints, the phrase 'free improvisation' has correctly been criticised (4). Yet, it undeniably serves to point out an area within the wider field of improvised music (which encompasses jazz and some rarified corners of rock or classical music): musicians working in this area have been concerned to extend improvisation beyond matters of expressive detail to matters of form. Drawing the boundary of this area must be arbitrary to some extent: in addition, the boundary overlaps with the area normally labelled 'free jazz'. Suffice it to say, that in this essay a working definition of 'improvisation' is adopted that includes some music with a clear jazz bias but concentrates in the main on music which does not. Where 'improvisation' in the sense used here needs to be contrasted with 'improvisation' in the broader sense, I will use the former phrase 'free improvisation', for convenience and without conviction (5).

I emphasise the word 'sketch'. A sketch of the same subject can be repeated any number of times and be different each time. There can indeed be no definitive history of improvisation. The reasons have been frequently explored. First, the 'historical source material' is necessarily insufficient: the documents which do exist (recordings, interviews, articles) are scattered, inevitably incomplete and usually misleading in that they privilege partial or even irrelevant perspectives, whether that of one player or commentator, or of listeners absent from the original performance (6). Secondly, there is no received canon of interpretation (7): even if we were to imagine an industry of critics to produce one, it is highly questionable whether there *should* be such a canon. Indeed, as I shall argue, it is precisely the openness of improvisation that is its specific virtue: this necessarily involves an openness on issues of value or perspective.

Without a shared perspective for critical assessment, there is no basis for a tendentious history of 'success' or 'failure'. Any historical study must therefore work through *a series* of perspectives. (Most of **Part Two** takes this form). Because these must first be articulated from the standpoint of the performer, it might seem that the listener's perspective is thereby neglected. I will, however, frequently refer to my own listening experience by way of illustration. The *relationship* between performer and listener perspectives is one of the issues explored in **Part Three**.

An attempt at historical description must involve consideration of such abstract issues for two reasons. Firstly, in so far as such description involves the writer's judgements about the worth of the music under discussion and appeals to the reader's sense of judgement, it confronts at once the prejudices derived from what I will call the *hierarchical mode of thinking*. In this hierarchy, the composer, the performer and the listener are ranked and in that order, and (it follows) music centred around interactions between improvising performers and specific listeners must be ranked lower (as a musical object) than a composed work. In **Part Three**, I argue that the hierarchical mode of thinking must be discarded. Secondly, once the weight of this hierarchical dogma is appreciated, it is clear that *opposing* it (which all the musicians discussed in this essay do, more or less) is a major task. One cannot grasp the work of these musicians, therefore, unless the meaning of their opposition to these hierarchical attitudes is also grasped. In all of this, I do not claim to

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offer more (or less) than a personal perspective (8).

A Summary Of The Form Of The Essay

Part Two...

(a) I begin with some reflections on the origins of free improvisation in Britain.

(b) I argue that in terms of aesthetic purpose there is a surprising amount of common ground between some free improvisation and some contemporary classical music it follows that improvisation deserves serious critical examination.

(c) I then proceed to examine British improvised music in the period 1965-1990 by means of eight lines of perspective. Each is related to substantive issues about the nature of free improvisation and suggests in turn further, and perhaps more fundamental, distinctions. I conclude this section with an attempt to formulate in positive terms the significance of improvisation.

(d) A brief summary of the historical part of the essay.

Part Three...

(a) I seek first to analyse and then to replace hierarchical notions of the relationship between composer, performer and listener. My purpose is to clarify the historical context in which free improvisation developed and formulate a critical standpoint from which it can now be adequately assessed.

(b) I try to articulate (in more general terms than in **Part Two**) the way in which improvisors have justified or might justify what they do.

(c) I continue (b) by looking at the virtues of improvisation in artistic activity generally suggesting how the aesthetic of free improvisation is shared with other twentieth-century art.

(d) Finally, I consider the perspective of the audience, both in the abstract and in the specific context of the audience for free improvisation in Britain today.

PART TWO Historical Sketch

(a) Origins

The majority of musicians involved in developing the practice of free improvisation in the 1960s in Britain were practising jazz musicians: Derek Bailey, Evan Parker, John Stevens, Keith Tippett, Trevor Watts, Eddie Prévost, Tony Oxley, Lou Gare, Paul Rutherford, Keith Rowe and Howard Riley. There were, of course, influential exceptions with a classical background (Cornelius Cardew and Hugh Davies, for instance) but this does not affect the general point. One might therefore think it useful to interpret the origins of free improvisation in Britain primarily in terms of an escape from what had come to be seen within jazz as certain constrictions of form and content, and to link it with the birth of free jazz in America and Europe. This goes too far but, certainly, free jazz in its early stages articulated some important possibilities and can therefore provide some pointers for the retrospective interpreter of free improvisation.

First, Ornette Coleman can be said to have focused attention on the possibility of breaking down the inherited melodic material of jazz into ever smaller components (each worthy of extended development in an open-ended fashion) and the importance of the blending of instruments (instead of the accepted and rigid hierarchy of saxophone, double bass and drums) (9). A constant theme in free improvisation ever since has been the importance of allowing each instrument an equal 'say'; the blending and matching of instruments in live performance could be seen as the central preoccupation of at least one main strand of free improvisation, as we shall see (10).

Secondly, John Coltrane and Albert Ayler, in particular, had developed styles of inspirational playing which stretched the standard jazz form of chorus and improvisation well beyond its limits. On Albert Ayler's record of live performances from 1967 (11) the initial melodic material (dismissively called 'tunes') is perfunctorily stated at the beginning of each piece, even more perfunctorily recalled at the end (and some points in between), and is little more than a pretext for the explosions that intervene. In this playing, the focus is very often on extended solos

(8) Compare Derek Bailey's remark (**Bailey**, page 3): "I couldn't imagine a meaningful consideration of improvisation from anything other than a practical and a personal point of view."

(9) He defined "harmolodic modulation" by saying that "the movements were written free of keys and making use of the total collective blending of transposed and non-transposed instruments, using the same intervals" (quoted in Barry McRae, **Ornette Coleman**, Apollo Crest Books, 1988, page 60).

(10) For instance, Gerry Gold's comments in a survey made of improvisors published in **The Improvisor** (Winter 1988-9, Vol VIII, pages 32-40): "Each member of a group of musicians must assume responsibility for developing the piece of music... each of the musicians is thus at the same time both leader and follower. This is the collective approach to improvisation." Compare John Stevens' early comments about the qualities of giving, the warmth of feeling between musicians in group improvisation (sleevenote to the recording by the Spontaneous Music Ensemble, **Karyobin**, Island Records, 1968). In Germany, the saxophone player Hans Koller, for instance, made a similar point (sleevenote to **Phoenix**, MPS, 1972).

(11) **The Village Concerts**, Impulse!, 1978.

whose virtuosic figuration dramatises for the listener the performer's intoxication. A contemporary described Ayler's playing as "speaking in tongues", suggesting that in this intoxication the normal bounds of sense are exceeded. It is fair to say that a similar drama is played out, in more or less mediated forms, in the work of many British improvisors — to take two examples, Evan Parker and Barry Guy.

Thirdly, Ornette Coleman's statement that "you just have a certain amount of space, and you put what you want in it" (which entailed the rejection of the structural building blocks inherited from the jazz tradition except as one possible starting point among others) had been taken up by the various Chicago groups which culminated in the formation in 1968 of the Art Ensemble of Chicago (12). Their music was open to many styles, to the introduction of a wide range of instruments from all parts of the world, even to the interpolation of words into the music as a textural device — music which opened a whole area of performance. The mixing and superimposition of styles has yielded a rich vein of material ever since: for example, in much of the work of the groups of Misha Mengelberg (13) and Maarten van Regteren Altena (14) in Holland, Codona (15) in America and much of Steve Beresford's work in Britain (16). I return to this type of playing in the section **Taking Liberties**.

These developments in jazz which excited great controversy at the time are an essential part of the context in which free improvisation first developed.

Certainly, also, there has ever since continued to be an exchange between free improvisation and the practice of music which is more dependent on the jazz tradition (for its harmonic and rhythmic material and its instrumental and textural regularities). Eddie Prévost, for instance, has been active in both. He has performed successfully with groups working recognisably in the jazz idiom (17), yet, also has articulated better than virtually anyone else the values inherent in free improvisation (18). He has belonged throughout its history to AMM, a group which has in my view — a view I hope to justify later in the essay (19) — explored more coherently than any other the potential of free improvisation.

Other musicians have worked primarily in a jazz idiom, but have consistently emphasised the special virtues of improvisation as a means of inspiration and communication. One such musician is the pianist Keith Tippett who was involved in free improvisation at its outset (20) and continues to champion it as a practice (21): his performances (whether in solo or in groups) have for me been among the most successful performances of open-structured improvised music that I have experienced. Another was the late John Stevens who sadly died while this edition was being prepared. He formed the Spontaneous Music Ensemble which pioneered free improvisation in the late 1960s and continued with various personnel until his death. At the same time he has remained very active in free jazz.

Another is Trevor Watts, a founder member of Spontaneous Music Ensemble who, however, set up a parallel group (Amalgam) to concentrate on jazz-oriented material and who has continued to work primarily in that vein (22).

Occasionally the idiom of free jazz has been combined *on the same recording* with more abstract textural exploration as in work involving the saxophone player, John Lloyd, the double bass player, Gus Garside, and the drummer, Dave Fowler (23). The fact that this is unusual suggests that an unofficial boundary has been drawn between jazz-based and non-idiomatic improvisation. Nonetheless, a number of individual musicians throughout the period have crossed the boundary with ease: for instance, Paul Rutherford, Kenny Wheeler and Marcio Mattos, as well as those mentioned earlier.

However, it would be quite misleading to see jazz as an exclusive point of reference for free improvisors during the period under review. Even at the outset, Derek Bailey has described (24) how the groups with which he was involved (first in the early 1960s, Joseph Holbrooke with Tony Oxley and Gavin Bryars, then later in the decade with Music Improvisation Company and Spontaneous Music Ensemble) were aiming at a form of improvisation free from any inherited idiom whether it be the "'tension and release' myth upon which scalar and arpeggio patterns are based", or "playing the pulse" or shared modal material. As he says, "much of our language was arrived at by the exclusion of elements we did not want." Of Music Improvisation Company (which for most of its history consisted of Bailey, Evan Parker, Hugh Davies and Jamie Muir and, in its last year, Christine Jeffrey) he says it was

(12) See for instance, the Art Ensemble's record **A Jackson In Your House**, Affinity, 1970 containing performances from 1969.

(13) **Instant Composers Pool Tentet In Berlin**, FMP, 1979, which contains, for instance, a piece ('Ludwig's Blue Note') which begins with a form of tango, proceeds to a free piano cadenza whose classical leanings end in a middle-Beethoven pastiche on the piano, followed by a minuet which slides into a distant variation of a specific Beethoven minuet.

(14) For example, the Maarten Altena Octet & Nonet, **Quick Step**, Claxton, 1986, containing recordings from 1984 and 1985 and **Op Stap** (with Morris Horsthuis (viola), Maude Sauer (oboes and soprano saxophone) and Paul Termos (alto saxophone)), Claxon, 1980. Another particularly effective example which is more suggestive and eloquent than most is Altena's solo bass playing on the joint recording with Tristan Honsinger in Berlin from 1976 (FMP).

(15) Codona was the trio of Don Cherry, Collin Walcott and Nana Vasconcelos and issued three records on ECM (**Codona 1-3**) in the 1970s and early 1980s.

(16) For example, **Up Your Sleeve** by the group Alterations (Beresford, David Toop, Peter Cusack and Terry Day) Quartz, 1980; **Gestalt Et Jive** (with Alfred 23 Harth, Ferdinand Richard, Uwe Schmitt and Anton Fier) Moers Music, 1985; and **Deadly Weapons** (with Beresford, Toop, John Zorn and Tonie Marshall)(nato, 1986).

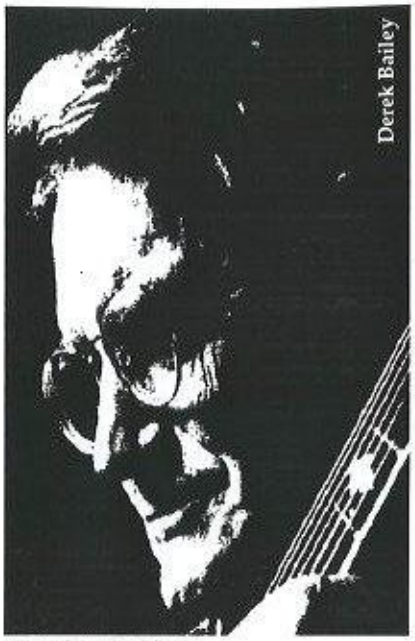
(17) Examples are **Live (Volumes I and 2)** by the Eddie Prévost Band with Marcio Mattos (double bass), Gerry Gold (trumpet/flugelhorn) and Geoff Hawkins (tenor sax), (Matchless Recordings, 1978); **Continuum** (with Larry Stabbins (soprano and tenor saxes), Veryan Weston (piano) and Marcio Mattos (Matchless Recordings, 1984); and **Resound** with Peter McPhail (alto and sopranino saxophones and flute) and Tony Moore (double bass) (Matchless Recordings, 1986).

(18) See particularly 'The Aesthetic Priority Of Improvisation: A Lecture' published in expanded form in **Contact** No. 25, Autumn 1982, pages 32-38. Other essays include 'Improvisation: Music For An Occasion' (**British Journal Of Music Education** (1985) Vol 2, pages 77-186); the essay cited in Note (4), and the unpublished 'A Letter To Novosibirsk'. He is also the author of a more general book on music **No Sound Is Innocent** (awaiting publication). Few other performers have attempted to stimulate debate in this way.

(19) Particularly in the section headed **Space/Time**.

(20) For early recordings by Keith Tippett see **Ovary Lodge** with Frank Perry (percussion) and Roy Babbington (bass) (RCA, 1973) and a recording by the group Amalgam (Keith Tippett, Trevor Watts, John Stevens, Kent Carter (bass), Lindsay Cooper (bass) and Terri Quaye (congas) called **Innovation** (Tangent, 1975).

(21) Recently in **Mujician II** (piano solo) (FMP Records, 1986) and **Sixty-Six Shades Of Lipstick** with Andy Sheppard (EG Records, 1990). The sleevenote on the latter is illuminating: "There should be no artistic problems with pre-conceived composition or spontaneous composition (total improvisation). Both are part of the complete music. Andy and I impose one rule upon ourselves before entering the studio. That rule being that no music preparation was to be made individually or collectively."



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involved in "a continuation of the search for a styleless uncommitted area in which to work." This was reflected in its personnel. While Bailey and Parker were jazz trained, the backgrounds of Davies and Muir were respectively classical and rock.

At the same time, a considerable degree of common ground with the recent history of avant-garde classical music was explicitly recognised by performers. Bailey studied and transcribed works of Webern; Hugh Davies was an assistant of Stockhausen; Tony Oxley used graphic scores of the sort developed in the classical avant-garde — for instance, for his 1971 record **Ichnos** (25). Derek Bailey's rejection of the 'tension and release' myth embedded in traditional harmony, bears an interesting and ironic resemblance to Boulez's disparaging comments on improvisation itself:

"Improvisation, and especially improvisation where there is a degree of sympathy between individual members, always follows the same curve of intervention: excitement, relaxation." (26)

Both are acutely aware of what they see as the traps of easy reaction, what Bailey calls "a facile vacuous type of improvisation."

At the same time, Stockhausen's experiments in intuitive music were widely known. Cornelius Cardew's compositions showed an acute appreciation of the role of the performer and how it might be extended (for instance, in the composition **Octet 61 For Jasper Johns** and the accompanying notes). Cardew's approach was more practical, less mystical, than Stockhausen's. In the course of looking for musicians to play his **Treatise** he became a member of AMM; he proceeded to found the Scratch Orchestra, an organisational and conceptual *tour de force*, whose constitution (published in the **Musical Times** in 1968) put forward a radical and confident new direction for avant-garde music in which improvisation was at the centre.

Both jazz and the classical avant-garde were of crucial importance in the birth of free improvisation; indeed the increasing instability of form which each displayed stimulated a search for a new musical territory beyond obvious stylistic categories. Not surprisingly, the influence of jazz and the classical avant-garde can be heard in improvisation throughout the period under review here; tracing this exhaustively would be pointless although it is worth emphasising that classical influences have often passed unremarked (27).

The first point to grasp about free improvisation is that it is a hybrid of both jazz and classical traditions. That in itself perhaps makes it interesting.

Before leaving the question of origins, it is worth remarking one way in which jazz did influence even those improvisors who sought a styleless area of music.

The influence is largely vestigial, a fingerprint visible in the way that in some early group playing players concentrate almost exclusively on the imitation of the line and shape of each other's contributions; the imitation of melodic line and phrase shape was an obvious area to explore for players whose jazz training would have required the improvising of melodic lines in accordance with certain rules. The presence of jazz, I would argue, can be felt also through the sheer effort by which certain types of material or instinctive response are *excluded*. The improvisations on the record **Karyobin** (10) are evidence of this. Perhaps as the result both of the strength of this desire to exclude and the practical difficulties of achieving complex and virtually simultaneous imitation of melodic line in a large group, there is a halting quality, a curious habit of pausing between phrases, like a diver constantly coming up for air.

More successful, in my view, and more open in its imaginative implications is one of the few recordings left of the work of Music Improvisation Company (28). Here in the smaller group, there is far greater variety of texture: Muir's kit was much more extensive than Stevens'; Hugh Davies' constructed electronic instruments were capable of a wide variety of effects ranging from the obviously tonal to the untuned. Percussion and electronics were able to integrate more effectively into the musical development of the group as a whole, whose focus shifted from an exclusive concentration on line and phrasing to an exploration of texture. An elaborate weaving of lines along one dimension is replaced by layering or overlapping of independently developed material. As with **Karyobin**, obvious emotive climaxes are avoided but not at the expense of emotion. It is a great achievement of this music that through processes as subtle as thickenings of texture and barely identifiable quickenings of interaction, musical events occur which

(22) For instance, **With One Voice** by his large group Moire Music (ARC, 1988).

(23) **Pentimento**, a cassette issued in 1988 by Gus Garside (double bass), Jon Lloyd (saxophone) and Dave Fowler (drums). Garside is also very active in promoting the ethic of improvisation in educational settings.

(24) **Bailey**, pages 102-111. For a later and interestingly different way of standing apart from the dictates of a style, see Roger Turner's comments (quoted in the **Ré Records Quarterly** 1 January 1986, issued by the record distributor Recommended Records): "Personally my priority is energy as conviction not energy as speed/dexterity. I always try to find the first no matter what... but enjoy also examining the second... These sorts of explorations are much more important to me than the confinements of a style."

(25) **Ichnos** with Kenny Wheeler (trumpet and flugelhorn), Evan Parker (saxes), Derek Bailey (guitar), Paul Rutherford (trombone) and Barry Guy (bass) (RCA, 1971).

(26) Pierre Boulez, **Conversations With Celestine Deliege**, London, 1976.

(27) To take a random selection: Keith Tippett's use of repetitive piano figures echoing Terry Riley, and the emotive use of glissandi by many players (strings, wind and brass instruments) which surely are paralleled in the music of Stockhausen (**Hymnen**), Ferneyhough (such as the **Sonatas For String Quartet**), Xenakis (his piece for string orchestra, **Shahaa**) and Ligeti's **Requiem**.

(28) Issued by Incus.

scan: **Chris Blackford**

carry a strong emotional charge. The comparisons between these two recordings illustrates well how a new direction was gradually formulated outside the constraints of the jazz idiom. I would now like to establish a more general point about the artistic value of the finest improvised music in the period since 1965. My comments are encouraged by (but not dependent upon) the analysis of **Part Three**, and form a preparation for the historical sketch which follows.

At this juncture, it is helpful to move forward to later work but I would contend that the points I wish to make could be equally well established from performances earlier in the period.

(b) Formed And Unformed

First, let me take as examples the recording issued by a group of European musicians, King Übü, in 1984 (29), and two compositions of Helmut Lachenmann, **Kontrakadenz** (1970-71) and **Accanto** (1975-76) (30).

Suppose you turned on the radio to hear one of these two records without knowing which. Suppose also that you ignored one obvious (and for this purpose irrelevant) difference between the two: namely, that it would take an improvising group of superhuman speed and precision of reaction to produce surfaces to approach the complexity of Lachenmann's works.

Consider the audible, musical processes to which the two recordings appear to invite attention. First, an openness to all sounds, with a particular attention to sounds which the ear would normally discriminate against as unformed, unmusical (31). Secondly, an interest in communicating to the listener the processes by which the 'unformed' develops into the 'formed', the recognisable, the quotable and (in the case of Lachenmann's use of Mozart's **Clarinet Concerto**) the already canonised. Thirdly, a pleasure, at times ironic, in the ability to construct mechanisms or gestures which yoke together the 'formed' and the 'unformed'; thus gestural combinations are achieved which, because they come from no recognisable emotional hinterland, can have quite a shattering emotive force. Fourthly, (and hardly surprising in view of the other elements we have identified) both musics show a comparative open-endedness of form (32).

I would contend that all these elements are common to the musical purpose of the music on both recordings. Yet, one recording is completely improvised (by a group of players admittedly with a considerable experience of playing together), the other is exhaustively composed by one person.

This drama of 'formed' and 'unformed' (to which I shall return at various points in the essay) is vividly brought out in Paul Rutherford's recording of solo trombone improvisations **The Gentle Harm Of The Bourgeoisie** (33). This recording contains extracts from live performances at the Unity Theatre in 1974. To my mind, this dramatic process is truly the centre of these remarkable performances. Because the process is necessarily dramatised through the body of one performer and because Rutherford's skill and extended technique allow the listener to hear, or appear to hear, the relation between the few conventionally produced notes and phrases and an underlying 'struggle' which seems to give rise to them, Rutherford is able to heighten this drama with exceptional clarity and wit. The pieces are like a vast stammer in which the meaning and worth of any 'well-formed' gestures which do emerge are constantly uncertain.

It is surely not too far-fetched (leaving aside, admittedly, major differences in the method of production and elaboration of execution), to see a parallel here to Brian Ferneyhough's exploration of the role of the performer in **Time And Motion Study II** for vocalising cellist and electronics (34). Ferneyhough, in his programme note for a performance at the 1972 Donaueschingen Festival, states that:

"In contrast to the usual view of a 'work', that which is heard is to be understood as the 'sounding trace', the spoor, of the mechanisms for which it stands... Thus it is intended that not only the experiential time of the performance itself but also the 'real time' involved in the act of composition is to act as the measure of significance. One has to dig out, analyse, project back. Whilst the work in no sense can be said to be improvisational, neither for the cellist nor for the operators of the electronic equipment whose work must be co-ordinated with his, the fact that the piece resists being relegated to the status of the product of something static, leads to it being transformed into a symbol for something provisional, i.e. for the conception of the self suspended in every moment between decay and consolidation." Ferneyhough's piece

(29) **King Übü Orchestrü** (Uhlklang,1985). King Übü here comprised Wolfgang Fuchs, Erhard Hirt, Paul Lytton, Radu Malfatti, Guido Mazon, Norbert Moslang, Hans Schneider, Phil Wachsmann and Alfred Zimmerlin.

(30) The two compositions are featured on the same record issued by Wergo, 1985.

(31) Lachenmann says in his notes to **Kontrakadenz** quoted on the sleevenote to this record: "What is heard, has not been placed there, because of sonorous qualities or because of particular structural applications but to document the result of the performer's actions making it possible to perceive certain mechanical conditions and resistances."

(32) Since the King Übü recording has no sleevenote commentary (and why should it?) my comments in the text necessarily constitute a personal reaction which might of course be rejected by the performers. But as made clear before it is not meaningful to go beyond a personal perspective.

(33) **The Gentle Harm Of The Bourgeoisie**, (Emanem, 1986).

(34) A recording by Werner Taube was issued by Musicaphon in 1976. The sleevenote repeats the programme note set out in the main text.

(35) See Eddie Prévost's comment in 'The Aesthetic Priority Of Improvisation' (see Note 18).

has been the subject of bitter criticism from the perspective of a performer (35). Yet, this commentary is of great interest, not just for its seeming (possibly unwitting) acknowledgement that improvisation might have something to contribute to the issues with which it is concerned. In his resistance to the recorded piece "being relegated to the status of a product," Ferneyhough, from his own perspective as a composer of exceptionally subtle inflection, has well expressed a resistance which many improvisors have felt to be central to their own work. Ferneyhough combines this with an intense awareness of the method of production of musical material, which again is shared by some improvisors.

One fundamental difference, of course, between Ferneyhough's composition and Rutherford's improvisation is that the latter as an improvisation cannot refer to some anterior process for validation and must display both process and product on the same continuous musical surface. Any 'digging back' is necessarily carried out in the real time of performance, there being no score.

But that does not mean that the ability of improvised music to provoke and stimulate is diminished. It is perhaps an interesting exercise of thought to consider which is the more appropriate means of musical production: a performance which can dramatise complex issues on its surface without requiring a vast reproductive apparatus; and a composition which, in addition to its controversial means of (re)production, is required to posit a *listener* who must re-imagine the real time process of composition itself, working back from an immediate presentation which is acknowledged to be no more than a "trace" (36).

Making such a comparison, however, runs counter to a very widespread assumption: that a notated composition is somehow 'more serious' or 'deeper' than an improvisation which is spontaneously produced, yet on the basis of years of practice and performance. This assumption is part of the hierarchical mode of thinking isolated in **Part Three**.

For the moment, I will proceed with a historical sketch of British improvisation in the period 1965-1990 without dwelling on those abstract issues which are tangled as we shall see.

My own perspective is that of a listener and a performer; therefore, it is necessarily personal. However, I will attempt to articulate what I apprehend as the various perspectives which other performers have adopted. In the absence of any explicit 'tradition' or any significant body of critical discussion, I see no other way in which to approach an understanding of this music. My personal taste is, of course, of secondary importance. As more fundamental issues emerge in the course of the description, I will make explicit my own beliefs, but this is in an attempt to avoid misunderstanding and stimulate discussion rather than to pass judgement.

(c) Eight Lines of Perspective

Whose Voice?

A dismissal of empty individualism, an appreciation of values of collective discovery is a major theme from the beginnings of British free improvisation (37) and a few musicians would, I imagine, seek to deny it (38). At the most basic practical level, the absence of a set of prior instructions makes detailed co-operation essential for successful improvisation.

However, general statements of value are one thing and the musical detail is another. In broad terms, one can distinguish in group improvisations first a type of music, which for convenience I shall label the *Parallel Voices* approach, whose preference is for each instrumental voice to be not just a colouring but an unmistakable and more or less continuous direction of its own. Each voice is that of an instrumental virtuoso. Each line of development aims to have such energy and propulsion that the listener has the choice, at least in theory, of following that line alone as a perspective on the music. As a result, when lines coalesce or merge, this is sensed as a triumph of individual skill, a 'special moment' rather than the basic *modus operandi* of the music.

By contrast much other group improvisation appears to start from a concern that, at the level of each 'gesture' or 'moment', all elements (texture, movement and, if present, pitch) are united as one group gesture. I label this the *Group Voice* approach. As gestures succeed or overlap each other, the aim is to achieve a completely natural flow *without* relying on one or more players appearing to drive it forward individually. In general, this type of music avoids any individual interventions which would disrupt the subtle balance within each gesture or the flow between them. It demands extraordinar-

(36) Ferneyhough's presumably deliberate echo of the terminology of Jacques Derrida may suggest a scepticism as to any notions of 'immediacy' or 'communication' and I am not seeking to deny that there are areas of doubt here where scepticism should have play! I am merely considering, however, a question of relative artistic means, not any such ultimate 'metaphysical' issues. It is also worth noting that similar concerns to those of Ferneyhough are found in the work of the group of American musicians, Mnemonists, who take initially improvised music (as well as other sources) and subject it to a large number of editing and other transformations: see the article by one of their members, Bill Sharp, in the edition of the **Ré Records Quarterly** referred to in Note 24. As Sharp puts it: "Our challenge is to try and leave some of the quality of this metamorphosis intact in the end-product in order that our listeners too may have sense of the act of composition (by listening selectively and critically to the various movements and elements within the sound: in fact by *listening as composers*)." Improvisation is only a subsidiary aspect of Mnemonists' work (for instance, **Horde**, Recommended Records, 1984), but I quote Sharp to illustrate further that Ferneyhough's concerns are by no means the monopoly of the classical composer.

(37) I make no apologies for the use of the label '*British* free improvisation'. The objections to it are obvious, ie, that national categories or characteristics are not meaningful here. But a geographical label is probably no less useful than any other in the context of a general airing of issues such as this: and as we shall see, there is in fact quite a lot that could be said to be distinctive about a 'British' approach.

(38) For example: Tony Oxley's comment on his early collaboration with Derek Bailey and Gavin Bryars: "We developed a collective language. Not a conscious, articulated language but step-by-step each step by a different person — a symbiotic thing" (**Bailey**, page 109); Cornelius Cardew said of his "Scratch Music" that it was "a method of uniting a group of people" (**Scratch Music**, Marion Boyars, page 16).

photo: **Phillip Edwards**

ily swift and well-directed contributions from each player.

This contrast is not intended as an absolute one; there is inevitably overlap between the two. Indeed, an equally valid *but different* contrast could be made between the Parallel Voices approach and the method of playing which AMM has evolved. The latter is concerned less with the intricacy of interplay at the level of phrases, and more with the construction over time of a wider sonic environment in which any one player's virtuosic claim for attention loses its force. I deal with this in more detail later.

I would take as examples of the Parallel Voices approach the playing of the longest established British free improvisors: Evan Parker, Derek Bailey, Barry Guy. All have amply demonstrated in solo work the ability to develop music which spans long periods while maintaining consistency and direction (39). Group playing to which they contribute frequently reflects this: each individual's contribution is strongly inflected and highly elaborate, leading at the group level to interaction of often extravagant ornateness, even wildness. A fine example of this type of playing might be **Supersession** (40), a live recording of a 1984 concert by Evan Parker, Barry Guy, Eddie Prévost and Keith Rowe. It is particularly interesting because it involves two players (Prévost and Rowe) who develop a different approach to group playing in AMM. Another example would be the duo between Anthony Braxton and Derek Bailey recorded in Canada in 1988 (41). In this recording, despite the players' remarkable ability to speak with the same voice at certain moments (for instance at the start of the record), much of the playing leaves me with the impression of two voices which speak together for a time without attempting to achieve a common statement. This is not necessarily a criticism: indeed, this sense of uncompromised individuality is one of the beauties of the recording.

Among specific examples of the Group Voice approach I would include the recent work of the trio of John Butcher, John Russell and Phil Durrant, **Conceits** (42), the work of the same trio with Radu Malfatti and Paul Lovens, **News From The Shed** (43); the work of a group combining Tony Oxley and Phil Wachsmann and others, **The Glider And The Grinder** (44); much of the work since the mid-1960s of John Stevens' various free improvising groups (45); and the improvisations of King Übü described above. In such playing, each player's gestures tend to be brief, allowing space for immediate 'comment' by others and often requiring 'comment' in order to have any impact at all. Grand gestures or rhetorical statements from individuals are avoided. There are barely any recognisable 'solo' contributions.

This approach cannot be explained as a 'later' development than the Parallel Voices approach. It is implicit to some degree in the early recording of Spontaneous Music Ensemble discussed earlier, and also in a 1973 recording involving Phil Wachsmann, Radu Malfatti and others (46).

From the perspective of the listener this music can be difficult. If the group's playing is not successfully unified, there are no virtuosic individual contributions on which to focus. In this respect, it differs radically from much jazz. This is certainly not improvised music which could be compared to a painting which the painter stands alongside every time we look at it, Gavin Bryars' pejorative description of improvised music (47).

When, however, it succeeds, the result is not a lack of characterisation but a subtlety and complexity of characterisation, a multiplicity of voices constantly running into each other and transforming into other voices; this surely represents a *collective* virtuosity of great power. In this respect, the Group Voice approach might be seen as the continuation *on a group level* of the exploration of interior voices that (as we shall see) is a major feature of much improvising in Britain, including that by proponents of parallelism. What I initially stated as a contrast can therefore perhaps be analysed as the development of the same aesthetic impulse at a different level.

The issue is, in fact, more complex still. Beyond the scope of the comparison developed so far in this section is the approach which I will label *style-mixing* and describe in detail in the section **Taking Liberties**. Steve Beresford is a British improvisor particularly associated with it. It combines an *anti-virtuosic* approach to individual playing and the constant changing of style and direction at the group level, so that the listener is *denied* the opportunity to trace a consistent line of thought or expression (a 'voice' in other words) through the piece.

It now becomes clear that the first axis of comparison which I have cho-

(39) Some of this solo work will be more fully considered below.

(40) A CD issued by Matchless Recordings 1988 (and recorded at a concert given in London in 1984).

(41) **Moment Précieux**, (Victo, 1987).

(42) **Conceits**, (Acta, 1987).

(43) **News From The Shed**, (Acta, 1989).

(44) **The Glider And The Grinder**, (Bead, 1987). The other players are Wolfgang Fuchs (sopranino saxophone and bass clarinet) and Hugh Metcalfe (guitar and oscillator).

(45) For example, **Biosystem**, (Incus, 1977). The players are John Stevens, Nigel Coombes (violin), Roger Smith (guitar) and Colin Wood (cello).

(46) **Balance** (Incus, 1973) on which the players were Phil Wachsmann, Colin Wood, Radu Malfatti, Ian Brighton (guitar) and Frank Perry (percussion).

(47) Gavin Bryars' comment was made in a conversation with Derek Bailey reproduced at **Bailey**, page 133.

original photo: **Phillip Edwards**

sen resolves nothing and merely highlights deeper differences. Its multiple connections with the issue of virtuosity are equally clear and I now turn to this issue.

Virtuosity

When moving along the first axis of comparison, we found virtuosity on both sides but in different guises: first the individual virtuosic voice and second a group virtuosity of elaborate interaction. In one way, the second type of virtuosity is more subtle in its effect, since for its appreciation it requires the listener to pay close attention to how the performance is being put together. It remains, nonetheless, virtuosity in the sense of a highly developed skill which the listener is meant to appreciate.

Virtuosity is without doubt an issue of contention among improvisors: in the survey of improvisors from which I quoted above (10), one of the questions was the value or necessity of virtuosity. No consensus seemed to emerge, and as we shall see this lack of agreement is amply demonstrated by musical example. I think one can discern at least four approaches to this issue.

First, I would distinguish players who have developed extended techniques on conventional instruments which can strike awe in those with a technical knowledge of the instrument, and even (in the case of Evan Parker's gravity-defying method of multiple voicing on the saxophone) in any lay person who cares to listen. In addition to Evan Parker, Derek Bailey, Barry Guy and Paul Rutherford are obvious examples of players with such extended techniques.

Such virtuosity may in part have provoked a second, or anti-virtuosic approach. The story of how the pianist and multi-instrumentalist, Steve Beresford, was ostracised by some performers at Company Week in 1977 (Derek Bailey's annual gathering of improvisors of different persuasions) because his approach to his instrument(s) and his technique was insufficiently serious (48) may be more rumour than fact, but it indicates at least that very real differences of approach existed among improvisors at this time. Nonetheless, at this time Beresford may well have found some support. More than one recording of Company Week 1977 was issued by Incus Records, the recording label which Evan Parker and Derek Bailey jointly founded, and on the record where Beresford appears (49) he is joined by, among others, Misha Mengelberg; Mengelberg whose ironic use of virtuosic display out of context and whose disclaimer (not perhaps to be taken too seriously) of his own instrumental ability has something in common with Beresford's. Beresford himself said that he wanted his playing to encompass both the totally controlled and the totally uncontrolled (50).

This is not only a question of attitude to a particular instrument, or even an unconcerned use of many different instruments without technique. Beresford and others have also frequently chosen instruments which by their very nature exclude the *possibility* of any great show of dexterity; toy pianos, for instance (activated as easily by the foot as by the hand), machinery of various sorts which needs only to be started not continuously 'played', flutes or whistles with which anyone could make a noise; even (by extension of the same idea) the casual use of the performer's voice in the course of improvisation.

The third approach distances itself from virtuosity more subtly. Some performers use sound sources which are not physically difficult to activate, yet require considerable imagination and application to *discover*. For example, the guitarist John Russell (encountered before for his playing with John Butcher and Phil Durrant) frequently in performance wets a finger and rubs it on the body of the guitar, back and front (51). Provided it can be heard (and it is surprisingly penetrating) it can produce beautiful and varied sounds, and yet at the same time is a subtle way of rejecting any virtuosic pretensions. Indeed John Russell's entire method of playing, which I greatly admire, avoids received techniques of harmonic or rhythmic development altogether, and focuses primarily on various ways of making the strings sound without strong harmonic implication, through scraping, clutching and releasing, or plucking.

Russell has developed an individual voice, achieved through constant contact with his instrument and its wider possibilities. This is virtuosity in a sense, but a looser sense than is normally used since it implies no agreed definition of skills as its reference point.

This approach is democratic in its implications: in other words, there are less constraints on adopting it and de-

(48) See Keith Potter, 'Free Improvisation — Review' in **Contact** No. 21, Autumn 1980, pages18-23.

(49) **Fictions**, (Incus, 1977).

(50) 'Steve Beresford Talks To Steve Lake At Steve Beresford's Flat On April 6th' published in **Musics** No. 14 (October 1977), page 15.

(51) John Russell can be heard solo on a joint record with Richard Coleman, **Homecooking... And Richard Coleman** (Incus 31). The recording dates from 1978 and is strongly influenced by Derek Bailey. Russell's recent and more original style is demonstrated on **Conceits** and **News From The Shed** (Notes 42 and 43 respectively).

veloping it, than is the case with the standard type of virtuosity. The instrument is redefined as a "total configuration" in Michael Nyman's phrase (52); virtuosity is redefined as the finding of an individual voice through the open-ended exploration of the instrument's resources. In other words, the performer finds a voice through finding a/the voice of his or her instrument. This exploration spurns the expression of 'individual emotion' as a starting point and yet culminates at its best in the finding of new voices which have a collective expressive potential.

It is worth exploring this point further since it is this approach to the instrument, so different from traditional virtuosity, that is common to a great deal of British improvised music. Its wider *theoretical* importance will become clear following the analysis of Section (a) of **Part Three**.

The guitar (whether electric or acoustic with amplification) has been a particularly fruitful area of exploration. The leading exponents in this field in Britain have been Keith Rowe and Fred Frith (53). Each uses a great variety of preparations to transform conventional means of attack; they use not just hand and plectrum, but sticks, mechanical vibrators, drop objects on to the strings, leave objects under the strings which, because the strings are amplified, can generate audible sympathetic vibrations when other parts of the guitar body or the strings are struck.

Keith Rowe has developed since the 1960s the use of a radio placed next to his guitar pick-up; this enables him to select conversational material from live radio programmes — a wry comment on the place of his performance in a 'wider world'.

This is perhaps an understated form of virtuosity in itself, a virtuosity in *finding*. Yet, it is clear from the above discussion that 'virtuosity' is inappropriate as a measure of the skills in question. What is at stake is much more the performer's intensity of engagement with the instrument. This may or may not involve forms of physical dexterity or other physical skill (such as breath control) that are conventionally valued; although if a musician has those skills it would be absurd to suggest that he or she should somehow hold back from using them, as the anti-virtuosic posture in its purist form seems to suggest.

If 'intensity of application' is a virtue (but not a virtuosity), it is open to anyone regardless of certain arbitrarily set skills, such as manual dexterity; it escapes dependence on the notion of a 'virtuoso technique' which in the cases of many classical instruments (and the same would apply to instruments used in the branch of jazz which has now adopted the competitive values of conservatoire performance), is acknowledged to be beyond the reach of *any performer* unless the technical basis has been acquired at a very early age and reinforced subsequently through constant training. The values which surround the notion of virtuoso technique in the conventional sense are an entirely artificial barrier to individuals seeking to find a voice through the playing of music at various stages in their lives.

It should also be appreciated that even where improvisation involves virtuosity in the conventional sense (and possibly of an extraordinary kind such as that developed by Evan Parker) the implications for the player and, I suspect, the listener, are radically different from those of virtuosity in the context of classical music. Compare the virtuosity of Evan Parker and, say, a flautist playing Ferneyhough's solo flute pieces: the first is willed by the performer, being the culmination of a long personal development; the second has been imposed by the composer (for the purpose of one particular piece alone, in some cases) who acknowledges that some of the instructions are not performable if strictly interpreted (54). As a corollary, if virtuosity ceases to be a necessary goal in musical performance, no tension arises when in a particular performance different kinds of virtuosity work in parallel — say, a virtuosic conventional technique combining with a newly invented instrument whose playing technique is simple (55).

This brings us to a fourth approach to the issue of virtuosity which is an extension of the third: the invention of completely new instruments whether by construction or by the adaptation for re-use of existing objects. To invent a new instrument is to leave behind the normal concept of virtuosity of execution entirely since no new instrument brings with it assumptions about what comprise its technical difficulties.

Among those who have concentrated on constructing new instruments is Max Eastley. I have seen him play a single amplified string attached to a long flexible piece of wood like a ski, which is capable of a range of sounds from the most delicate glassy tinklings

(52) **Nyman**, page 17.

(53) For example, Keith Rowe's recent recording **A Dimension Of Perfectly Ordinary Reality** (a CD issued by Matchless Recordings, 1989) and Fred Frith's solo LPs **The Guitars On The Table Approach Vols 1 & 2** (Recommended Records,1981). Their work has to be considered in connection with that of Henry Kaiser (USA) and Hans Reichel (Germany).

(54) The rare cases where a composer of a work of extreme technical difficulty also performs it (Michael Finnissy or Heinz Holliger) do not significantly affect the point. For one performer's reaction to instructions to do the impossible, see Rohan De Saram's interview with Richard Scott in **Wire** No. 72, February 1990, page 40.

(55) A recent example I heard was a fine concert of performances by Max Eastley (on home-made electronic instruments) and Marcus Eichenberger (alto sax and clarinet) in London in October 1990 where very different degrees of physical application were required from the players, yet each instrument produced sounds of considerable and well-matched complexity. I turn to Max Eastley's work shortly.

scan: **Chris Blackford**

to thunderous vibrations. He also issued a remarkable record in the 1970s (56) demonstrating instruments such as the hydrophone and the metallophone. What is striking about this record is the extraordinary calm which it communicates. The process of instrument invention involves considerable skill but is directed *not* at creating an instrument which will be a further vehicle for manual dexterity; one instrument (the hydrophone) is self-playing, involving the movement of water by gravity. In this music, virtuosity has been transcended and impersonality achieved.

Comparable are the explorations of the Bow Gamelan Ensemble (57). I will return to the visual and theatrical aspects of their music later, but the key point here is that the performer's role is changed from that of player of an instrument to that of discoverer and activator of a sound. This a more radical rejection of virtuosity than adopting an explicitly anti-virtuosic stance while playing, for such a stance always involves the implicit assertion of the playing skills of the individual making it. The work of Max Eastley and Bow Gamelan Ensemble has been dedicated in some ways to *effacing* any traces of individual intervention. In the next section, we shall examine the aesthetic of AMM which is subtly but crucially different.

In the light of the analysis of **Part Three** we will see how such questionings of the notion of virtuosity have a significance much wider than the field of free improvisation and imply a less rigid, more democratic understanding of musical practice.

Space/Time

Both the previous sections have raised issues about expression, whether from the perspective of the individual or the group, the virtuoso or the less adept performer. In both cases, it has become clear that there is potentially radical disagreement among British improvisors. It is appropriate now to broach an even more sensitive issue which is particularly resistant to explicit statement: the question of what (if any) is the appropriate form of a free improvisation and how might it be related to the meaning (if any) of the music it contains?

One general aspect of free improvisation that has always puzzled me is its frequent taste for high density of information and elaboration.

The issue is not always economy at the level of individual gestures over time: much improvisation gives the impression of a compulsion to fill available space with a series of separate or continuous gestures (58).

Let me take a fairly neutral example: the recording of trio improvisations at Company Week in 1978 by Anthony Braxton, Derek Bailey and Evan Parker, issued by Incus Records. The example is neutral for two reasons: firstly, because no one could question the experience or skill of each of the players; secondly, because this is not by any stretch of the imagination a bad record. It contains sections of great power (for instance, at the end of the second piece on Side 2). The key point is that if one attempts to take an impression of the record as a whole, it is of hectic activity which is rarely relaxed, of elaborate figuration simultaneously from each player which makes it difficult for the listener to grasp an overall sense of form or even a clear direction at any moment. This must ultimately be a matter of choice which, I think, could be demonstrated from many other recordings by these and other musicians. This seems to me to be puzzling.

The question of how much 'information space' is taken up with any gesture or series of gestures is necessarily linked to the question of the time-scale on which the players conceive an improvisation as developing; for the shorter the imagined time-scale, the greater the self-restraint called for to limit expression to what is necessary.

Imagined time-scale may be different from the *actual length* of a completed improvisation. It relates rather to the forward development-span which the performers carry with them mentally through the piece. Many improvisations (especially in a live context) comprise loosely linked series of independent episodes lasting together 30 minutes or more (59): the considerable length of the improvisation as a whole should not blind us to the fact that the projected time-scale of the musical material at any point may be shorter.

This episodic structure is linked to a more general point which influences the formal aspects of improvisations at the level both of episodes and of completed pieces. If the improvisation is 'free', it would appear that neither harmonic or rhythmic links carry sufficient structural weight to allow obvious references *between* pieces, any more than within pieces. If "trying forever to reach climaxes" — an apt phrase of the American improvising pianist Borah

(56) **New And Rediscovered Musical Instruments**, (Obscure Records, 1975) (issued jointly with David Toop).

(57) **Great Noises That Fill The Air**, (Klinker Zoundz, 1988). Bow Gamelan Ensemble comprises Anne Bean, Richard Wilson and Paul Burwell and was founded in 1983.

(58) This has been an aspect of free playing which has been readily noticed: for instance Stockhausen's criticism of live performances heard at Donaueschingen in 1971 as "just chaos": "Everyone played as loud and as fast as possible and everyone at once." **Towards A Cosmic Music** (Element Books; translated by Tim Neville, 1989, page 13).

(59) As an example take the extremely sensitive and beautiful live improvisation by Barry Guy and Fred Van Hove (piano), **Assist** (Jazz And Now, Tokyo, 1985).

photo courtesy of **Phil Wachsmann**

(60) Quoted on the sleevenote to his recording **Upside Down Visions**, (Soul Note, 1985).

(61) To speak of 'silence' is of course to invoke the ghost of John Cage's writings. Silence may of course be 'undirected', entirely open-ended and free from anticipation (Cage's ideal) or 'directed', a silence started, maintained and ended by the performer. It is the latter I am primarily concerned with here.

(62) Issued as the **New Acoustic Swing Duo** (ICP, 1984, containing recordings from 1967): one might also compare **Porto Novo** a trio of Marion Brown (alto), Maarten Altena (bass) and Han Bennink (Arista, 1975), again containing recordings from 1967.

(63) Evan Parker and John Stevens, **The Longest Night Volume II**, (Ogun Recordings 1978); Garry Todd and Roger Turner, **Sunday Best**, (Incus, 1979).

(64) Bead Records (Bead 23) containing recordings from 1984 and 1985.

(65) Such as **Monoceros** and **The Snake Decides** each issued by Incus.

(66) In 'A Letter To Novosibirsk' (see Note 18) where he refers to "parallel playing, when musicians inhabit the same performance space but are unable or unwilling to engage in dialogue except in some abstract, atomistic, if simultaneous manner."

(67) To get some sense of the musical development which AMM's own history involves, one might compare the early performances from 1966 (Electra; reissued on CD as **AMM Music 1966** by RéR in 1989) on which the performers were Eddie Prévost, Keith Rowe, Cornelius Cardew, Lawrence Sheaff and Lou Gare where very long musical lines are allowed at the expense, perhaps, of a certain flatness of presentation, and the much more subtle changes in recordings from the 1980s: **Generative Themes** (Matchless Recordings, 1983) and **The Inexhaustible Document** (Matchless Recordings, 1987). On these recordings the players are John Tilbury (piano), Keith Rowe, Eddie Prévost and Rohan De Saram (cello).

Bergman (60) — is the aim, then surely every piece, and perhaps every episode within it, must carry this burden. This may explain why in my experience little attention is given in live performance to suggesting connections *between* pieces, still less a progression of any sort. Each piece, as it were, is a splinter from the same vast rock.

However that may be, silence *within* pieces is necessarily an issue here (61). Is silence conceived as a threat to the flow of an improvisation, or rather as the ground (occasionally acknowledged explicitly) from which the improvisation springs? That silence can have a very powerful effect on the total impression made by a larger performance, is for me demonstrated by one of the most memorable moments in any live performance that I have experienced. Towards the end of a particular piece by AMM in the 1986 Incus Festival, there was a prolonged silence, a false ending after which play resumed as it had stopped and in doing so suggested a continuity of feeling *through the silence*, which transformed the implications of everything that had been played before.

Yet, silence is not exploited by the musicians under discussion as much as one would expect. To illustrate this let me take first a recording by Dutch musicians where silence is used to great effect: the duo of Han Bennink (percussion) and Willem Breuker (saxophone) dating from 1967 (62). Here individual contributions of great force and dramatic input may occur in sequence rather than simultaneously, and silence is used to emphasise the contrasts involved. Associations are allowed to develop freely in the mind of the listener without any frantic attempt to make linear connections between each player's material.

But you have only to compare this with two British recordings for the same combination and from around the same period to be struck by how the latter focus on *continuous* play in which barely any silence is left between the performers (63). All the emphasis is on the closest possible rhythmic match, a sort of filigree which leaves little scope for larger gestures which might give an innocent listener some clue as to the *purpose* of this detailed interaction.

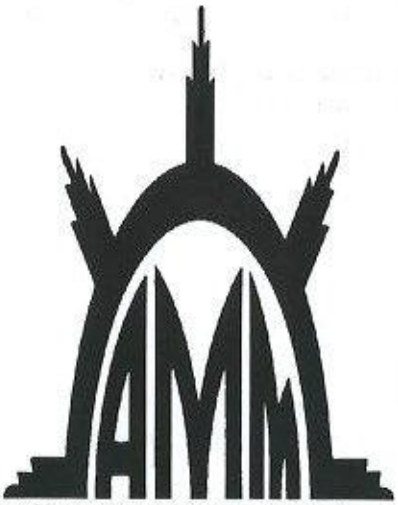
I do not think it unfair to say that the latter type of playing (which of course may have its virtues) has been particularly prevalent in Britain; and yet it seems to create obvious difficulties for the listener seeking to grasp its direction and purpose. Its prevalence is a variation on the puzzle with which I began this section. It is perhaps for that reason that British performances which show a greater boldness of dramatic shaping are noteworthy. As my first example let me take the solo LP issued by Phil Wachsmann, **Writing In Water** (64) whose first side consists of a live performance where a pre-recorded tape is played out and Wachsmann performs a live 'accompaniment'. Some of the eloquence of this music (and I consider it is one of the most eloquent examples of British free improvisation in this period) results from its measured pace, its reflectiveness, the way in which it *suggests* surrounding space rather than trying to occupy every inch of it.

The fact that such playing appears unusual should remind us of what previously we identified as the feature of the Parallel Voices approach: the impulse of each player to maintain a continuous flow of invention, leaving little silence. When discussing it, I referred to group playing and it might seem unfair to imply a comparison with solo work where the problem of interaction does not arise. However, the same contrast between continuous motion and Phil Wachsmann's solo playing could equally be demonstrated from the remarkable but unrelenting solo recordings of Evan Parker (65). A similar line of thought has been expressed also by Eddie Prévost in an unpublished article (66).

AMM, the group with which Prévost is mostly associated, has been exceptional in confronting these issues of form and their approach deserves detailed attention. It is one of the distinctive features of AMM's playing that through the music it communicates a sense of a larger world in which the music takes place and at the same time tries to encourage in the listener a special quality of attention.

AMM (67) is the only improvising group which has remained in existence throughout the period under review. Indeed two of its members have been involved since its inception, Eddie Prévost and Keith Rowe. It is also the only group with which is associated a fully articulated philosophy of playing. Not only Cornelius Cardew but also Keith Rowe, John Tilbury and Eddie Prévost have been active in disseminating their view of what their work comprises.

Their starting point for musical purposes is an explicit recognition that



graphic courtesy of **Matchless Recordings**

through the exploration of sound in a group context *new areas* of meaning can be discovered, in fact a new sensibility which is liberating for the *individual* player, yet necessarily achieved through *common* effort. This is achieved particularly through an attention to informal sound rather than fully formed musical elements. On the face of it, this might not appear so distinctive; I have already referred to statements by other musicians emphasising the collectively acquired nature of their language (38). Nor are AMM unique in their special interest in informal sound: I argue below that this is one of the fundamental features of improvised music.

To understand what is special about AMM's philosophy it is worth looking a little more closely at how Cornelius Cardew in his programmatic text ('Towards An Ethic Of Improvisation' in his **Treatise Handbook**) formulated the issue (68):

"Informal 'sound' has a power over our emotional responses that formal 'music' does not, in that it acts subliminally rather than at a cultural level. This is a possible definition of the area in which AMM is experimental. We are *searching* [Cardew's italics] for sounds and for the responses that attach to them, rather than thinking them up, preparing them and producing them. The search is conducted in the medium of sound and the musician himself is at the heart of the experiment."

What is vital here is the statement that discovery is through live performance and (it follows) the player must be as capable of listening while performing as of playing.

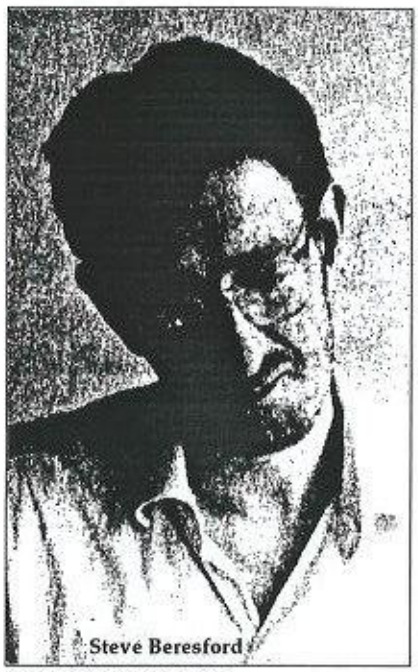
Listening, searching, discovery: these all necessarily take time, and require an appropriate musical form within which they can take place. The performer, let alone the listener (who cannot be arbitrarily excluded from this exploration) does not start a piece on the verge of a discovery! Each must be brought towards the moment when previously unsuspected meaning is achieved. If you believe as Cardew explicitly states that this search is conducted *in the course of the music* (he rejects the notion of the meanings being brought up in advance and then laid before the listener as complete), it follows necessarily that questions of larger intuitions of form arise. This form will not be inevitable in the sense that the climax of a classical sonata movement is inevitable. But, without attention to form and its communication to the listener, how is the disclosure of meaning which is the purpose of improvisation on this conception to be achieved (69)? Indeed, what else is the disclosure of musical meaning except the sensing of form in what previously lacked form?

In my view AMM are unique amongst British improvising groups in the depth of their appreciation of what is arguably the fundamental issue of this music: what form is appropriate to express adequately a meaning as yet unformed?

How do AMM show this awareness? It is evident first in their avoidance of unnecessary complexity of figuration or ornamentation by individual players; elaborate imitations of line or phrase-shape (or the sort we have come across elsewhere) are avoided. (This attitude is, of course, connected with the issues relating to virtuosity discussed in the previous section). This in turn allows the listener to sense a space around each player, rather like the space which is necessary in a classical drawing to allow the eye to establish by many individual comparisons a sense of perspective. Thirdly, and growing naturally out of the first two features, AMM show no embarrassment in allowing the listener to gain a sense of a large-scale momentum occurring through the course of a piece: whether through *crescendi*, accelerations or gradual increases of overall density. In other words, the listener is generally given sufficient signals to improvise a context of understanding. Fourthly, and a particularly important example of the third point, AMM have consistently allowed a place in improvisation for echoes or remnants of the everyday world. We have already come across Keith Rowe's use of live radio and this is just a concentrated example of the much wider use of machinery and the sounds of everyday life in their work. This is much more than modishness: it has a major structural importance. It immediately allows the listener (and of course there is a listener which sits within each of the performers while playing) to establish a perspective from which to interpret the purely instrumental gestures. What perspective is achieved will depend entirely on individual context but the crucial point is that in AMM's music *the listener is allowed a way in*. Having found a way in, the listener is given signals in the course of a piece which foster a sense of the functioning of the improvisation

(68) Contained in the **Treatise Handbook**. Luigi Russolo (in **The Art Of Noise: A Futurist Manifesto**, trans. Filiou) had said as long ago as 1915 that "noise has the power to bring us back to life."

(69) The use of the Heideggerian term, "disclosure", is deliberate. For it seems to me that Heidegger's prolonged enquiry into how (in the absence of any innate and already disclosed sense of human purpose or meaning) the meaning of Being is disclosed from out of the myriad of particulars of ordinary life is very suggestive for improvisors and indeed for any artists working in a medium without a well formulated canon of interpretation.


Steve Beresford

original photo: **Mick Dunn**

as a whole. The relationship implied here between performers and listeners is far from a rigid one: Eddie Prévost in particular has opposed the distortion of musical communication by misplaced notions of authority (once again we anticipate the analysis of **Part Three**). It has been a feature of too much British improvisation that it is focused inadequately on these issues, and it is AMM's special contribution to have formulated them and (in my experience of their live and recorded performances) found means of solving them.

The question of form cannot, however, be left there. Firstly, one should point out other ways in which formal interest has been generated by improvisors: I have in mind the aspects of Paul Rutherford's and King Übü's playing discussed earlier. We will also discuss later 'multiple voicing' of this sort, for instance in the music of The Ferals which significantly includes a real human voice, that of Phil Minton.

Secondly, and more importantly, I must again draw attention to a radically different method of improvising in which *any* intuitions of form are constantly disrupted. The group Alterations featured among others Steve Beresford and Peter Cusack: in its record dating from 1980 (16) one development succeeds another without obvious connection; indeed sometimes the impression is given that music is designed to *efface* what precedes it, so absolute is the break. As we shall see in the next section this is connected with a conception of style which again is radically different from AMM's attempt to develop a rigorous, consistent and therefore recognisable approach to group playing.

Equally radical in its implications is the work of other musicians adopting a quite different approach from Steve Beresford. For them articulating musical meaning *in the course* of an improvisation (and the issues of form this entails) is not a primary concern. I have in mind, for instance, the pieces on invented instruments by Max Eastley discussed earlier: in these, significance may be grasped by the listener through interpreting the subtle changes in the sounds produced by an instrument, yet these changes are by no means always connected with the intervention of the performer during the performance. In the case of the 'hydrophone' all the sounds produced are implicit in the initial state of the instrument when the performance begins.

This aspect of Max Eastley's work represents, perhaps, an extreme, at least as seen from the perspective which I have been developing. In fact, on the sleevenote to the record referred to in (56), he described himself not as a musician but as "a visual artist who attempts to use sound." It is the approach represented by Steve Beresford and others working in a similar vein that is more relevant to the main themes of this essay and to which I now turn. Radically different from AMM it certainly is; whether it is radical in any valuable sense is less clear. Such questions are matters of personal taste, to some degree: I return to them towards the end of **Part Two**.

Taking Liberties

We have seen how at its outset a major strand in British improvisation was concerned to avoid an empty facility of expression and therefore sought a 'styleless' area in which to work.

But there has also been in European free improvisation (if not always so consistently in Britain) a quite different instinct. This sees improvisation as primarily a freedom from inhibition: freedom from the constraints of a specific style certainly and perhaps also freedom from any stylistic injunction, including that of stylelessness. In other words, a freedom to combine styles, to turn them upside down, without necessarily suppressing their associations.

At this point I will shift the focus briefly to music produced outside Britain. Although there was a considerable amount of musical contact (70) between British musicians and the leading European groups in the mid-late 1960s (for instance those centring around Peter Brötzmann and Alexander von Schlippenbach in Germany and Han Bennink and Misha Mengelberg in Holland), the more relaxed approach I have just identified is sharply distinct from the early explorations of British groups such as Spontaneous Music Ensemble. The differences of approach in other words must have been the result of conscious choice, not mutual isolation.

I have already pointed out a readiness to mix styles in the work of the Art Ensemble Of Chicago and the groups which led to its formation (such as the Creative Construction Company) and there is a strong similarity to this in the partially composed interactions of Misha Mengelberg's groups (13). The virtues of this music are a well-communicated sense of fun, an exhilarating

(70) For example, Evan Parker performed frequently in groups with Brötzmann and Bennink: eg, on the LP **Machine Gun** (FMP, 1968).

scan: **Chris Blackford**

wilfulness and a fearlessness in exploring bizarre combinations of style. There is *no* concern to establish or maintain one overall tone throughout the piece. Because stylistic quotations are quite often precise, two obvious practical differences from most British free improvisation of the same period follow. Firstly, the *necessity* of some degree of structural planning; pieces are generally attributed to specific composers within the group and generally have a clearly defined event-structure. Secondly, a considerable precision and clarity of execution is necessary if intended references or parodies are to make any sense: correspondingly there is less interest in the exploration of the *sound qualities* for their own sake. At the same time, excessive polish or elegance is avoided.

This approach is much more open than British playing to grand dramatic gesture. For example, Han Bennink's whole style of percussion playing (with its shattering of drum sticks and bellowing to the audience) deliberately exploits the usually repressed dramatic potential of the improvisor, the musician who *could* do just anything at any time in total disregard of conventions of stage behaviour. One could argue that the relative priority given to dramatic effect rather than detailed instrumental interaction is a more general feature of European free improvisation of which **Machine Gun** (70) is the most extreme example. What I am describing is much wider than histrionics. It is an openness to the dramatic implications of the performance situation of improvisation. In a more subdued but related way, the juxtaposing of styles (risking at every step stylistic improprieties) has continued to be a major interest in playing in continental Europe. The work of various groups led by Maarten Altena is of interest here (14). This music varies unpredictably from the cool to the engaged. Jazz references are not suppressed although they are often treated ironically. It is just as likely, however, to parody classical sources. Paradoxically, this music may be closer to 'stylelessness' than British music with the same avowed aim.

At no time in British improvising has there been a parallel to the relaxed, undoctrinaire wilfulness of Misha Mengelberg's groups, at least until recently. The closest parallel has emerged in the duo of the percussionist Steve Noble and the pianist Alex Maguire (71). They have developed a style of open-ended free-flowing improvisation which differs from the work of Mengelberg and Altena in that there is no obvious pre-arranged structure but is strongly reminiscent of it in the way in which incongruous stylistic combinations are built up. They achieve a fast moving parade of ideas. Maguire's style combines virtuosity with a range of references from atonal playing to honky-tonk to jazz ballads. Noble keeps up an ever-changing combination of textures and gestures. Both players show little interest in exploiting the marginal areas of expression and texture to which so much of this essay is devoted.

If there is little in British playing that is close to the Dutch work I have discussed, there is nonetheless an important line of development in Britain which could be said at least to be working in parallel. I have in mind the work of which Steve Beresford is an important representative, touched on earlier. As example recordings, I would take two involving Beresford — **Up Your Sleeve**, 1980; **Deadly Weapons**, 1986 (16); **Barbecue Strut** by The Recedents (72), and **Pop Out Eyes** by British Summertime Ends (73). Let me first try to characterise the general features of this approach.

As before, there is a constant mixing of styles, but the intention appears more obviously to disrupt the possibility of *any* consistent mode of 'self-expression'. As the development of ideas is frequently interrupted, the listener has no opportunity to make any judgement about the music's direction; not surprisingly, the pieces are frequently quite short. Ironic commentary is often included: whether the deliberately irrelevant quotation of sentimental popular songs (for instance on **Up Your Sleeve**); or a verbal commentary by a 'character' who is struggling unsuccessfully to describe the music as it happens (**Barbecue Strut**) — the very funny commentary is by Lol Coxhill. As discussed in the context of 'virtuosity', some of this music may also seek to disrupt any virtuosic pretensions: the musicians may each play a variety of instruments and these are often chosen for their comic implications: for example, on **Up Your Sleeve** Beresford plays among other things a toy piano, a music box, an out of tune upright piano and "low grade electronics".

It would be wrong to give the impression that these records are all alike. In **Up Your Sleeve** and **Deadly Weapons** the wilful avoidance of consistency is particularly marked but at the same

(71) **Live At Oscars**, (Incus, 1987).

(72) The Recedents comprise Lol Coxhill (saxophones and voice), Roger Turner (percussion) and Mike Cooper (guitars). **Barbecue Strut** was issued by nato in 1986. For an album which illustrates some similar but other very different aspects of Coxhill's work, see Note 87.

(73) **Pop Out Eyes**, (nato, 1986). This group comprises Clive Bell, Sylvia Hallett and Stuart Jones: each plays a variety of instruments and sings.

original photo: **Dagmar Gebers**

time there is a greater ability to disturb. **Deadly Weapons** is resourceful in its development of the possibilities of stylistic mixing, partly because the elements it combines have vague rather than precise associations: simulations of forest sounds, snatches of sultry love songs, echoes of portentous film music. This is achieved entirely without sampling techniques.

In the other two records I detect a more measured and settled approach even if the elements combined are chosen precisely because they do *not* fit together from any specific stylistic perspective (for instance, the simultaneous verbal commentary, repetitive drumming and blues guitar at the opening of **Barbecue Strut**). In **Pop Out Eyes** in spite of an admirable clarity of conception and execution, the capacity of such combinations to provoke or disturb has been replaced entirely by a detached wit from which any *feeling* of spontaneity has gone. In fact the pieces would appear to be wholly or largely composed. This does not disqualify them as evidence in this context; on the contrary it illustrates how improvising musicians working within the broad approach which I am attempting to identify are much less wedded to presenting any ideal of spontaneity than other improvisors (74).

Those working within this area have become increasingly attracted to the use of what one might call 'ready made material'. As I shall make clear later, this in fact may be seen as the foreshadowing of a new type of 'transformative listening'. But at the same time there are radical differences between this approach and the focus of most work considered in this essay: instrumental exploration through attention to the qualities of 'informal' sound. And yet this approach must clearly also be seen as a coherent attempt to resolve the problem which Derek Bailey and others addressed at the beginning of this period: what method of playing is acceptable when all styles are discredited or at least disavowed? It resolves that problem in terms which are close to Fredric Jameson's concept of *pastiche*. He has defined this most effectively (75) as follows:

"The disappearance of the individual subject, along with its formal consequence, the increasing unavailability of the personal style, engender the well-nigh universal practice today of what may be called pastiche."

Jameson distinguishes this sharply from *parody*.

"Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar mask, speech in a dead language: but it is a natural practice of such mimicry, without any of parody's ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter and of any conviction that alongside the abnormal tongue you have momentarily borrowed, some healthy linguistic normality still exists. Pastiche is thus black parody."

The point is clear once we transpose Jameson's apocalyptic statement of the "disappearance of the individual subject" into the more manageable and plausible view that style as an unproblematic means of expressing individual emotions has ceased to function.

But the danger of pastiche is that it evokes the same blank reaction in listeners each time (a shrug of the shoulders). The style-mixing approach is not immune from this danger.

Humour

Humour is too subtle and various to function as a dimension along which approaches to improvisation can be measured. However, there are some interesting differences to be observed in the way that players approach it.

The first point to make is that many recordings appear, deliberately, to exclude humour as a dimension and certain performers are quite consistent in this (needless to say this is intended as nothing more than a comment on a musical level, not a personal level): one would not turn to a solo recording of Evan Parker, Howard Riley or Barry Guy for much humour or playfulness. This is music which seeks at all times to convince of its urgency, its directedness, and humour would deflect from that. By contrast, Derek Bailey's solo work is particularly striking for achieving a concentration of attention which nonetheless rarely carries any implications of "reaching for climaxes" (76). His playing equally rarely (77) uses devices that are recognisably humorous yet in its detachment, its point-blank refusal to allow 'sentiment' to seep out, its constant changing of direction and self-undermining, it is very witty, if not generally humorous.

But there are many other players for whom humour plays an important role. Examples of satirical humour are rare. One example might be Keith Rowe's sampling of radio voices (mentioned above); another might be Lol Coxhill's use of verbal commentary referred to in the previous section. The reason is

(74) In this respect it can be virtually interchangeable with some more strongly idiomatic music in which improvised music is used as a colouring. For instance, a passage of free improvised piano music crops up like a brand name in the midst of a mundane and highly regimented piece ('Slow Fuse') on the album **The Freedom Principle: Acid Jazz Vol II** (Polydor, 1989).

(75) 'Postmodernism Or The Cultural Logic Of Late Capitalism' in **New Left Review** #146 (July-August 1984), pages 64-65.

(76) For a remarkable performance which is close to being an exception to this consider his duo with Cecil Taylor, **Pleistozeaon Mit Wasser**, a CD issued by FMP in 1989.

(77) Some direct musical satire of a powerful kind can be found in the early and (in some cases informal) improvisations (dating back to as early as 1971) on the solo LP **In Whose Tradition?** (Emanem, 1988).

not hard to find: to make a satirical point *through* music, points of reference from which and to which the satire is directed need to be very clearly established. This is difficult to achieve without, say, a clear interpretative context (78) or the ability (normally through composed structures) to quote very precisely (79). Perhaps, as samplers come to be used more widely in improvisation, this will change.

Incongruity is a more promising area for improvisors to explore as a source of humour. The sense of things not fitting together is a feature of the stylistic mixing discussed in the previous section. But the result may not be humour so much as a general feeling of disengagement. Incongruity can be developed, however, on other levels. One is the exploiting of conflicting images generated by the same performer. Tristan Honsinger is an American musician, associated with many of the Dutch musicians referred to above, who has developed this to a high degree. In his solo cello performances he has turned the standard image of the performing cellist against itself by singing and vocalising over his playing, bringing as it were out into the open what the listener can imagine is the normally hidden internal voice of the performer as he plays (80).

I am not aware of any British improvisor who has developed this approach; it remains an area for further exploration. Perhaps Alan Tomlinson's practice of imitating his trombone with his voice has something in common. An area which has received more attention from British musicians is incongruity between thematic elements which are themselves not fully defined or capable of any stylistic categorisation: one uncertainty of identification feeds on another and the result can veer suddenly from knockabout jokiness to considerable tension. This ability to move from one emotion to another is a powerful quality of the solo voice of Phil Minton and of the group playing of The Ferals — which comprises Phil Minton, Alan Tomlinson, Roger Turner and Hugh Davies (81). Humour is an inadequate description of the complex mood they achieve.

At this point the involvement of the human voice in instrumental improvisation deserves a brief discussion. I have discussed in relation to AMM the importance of allowing the listener a 'way in' to interpreting the flow of the music. The inclusion of a human voice is an obvious 'way in' since it is virtually impossible for a human voice to bring no images in its train (82). It is the particular ability of Phil Minton to suggest myriad characters, events, cultural contexts, raw emotions, through the inflections of his voice, without letting any one upset the overall balance of the music or its flow. His voice is an instrument of multiple suggestion which constantly sets off new possibilities in the other instruments (83). In that sense, it is a model (transposed to a different field) of the highly flexible approach to conventional instruments in free improvisations which we discussed in the section headed **Virtuosity**.

As a final point in this section, I would acknowledge that a survey of humour in improvised music from records is something of an absurdity since the visual aspects of performance are lost and yet may at the same time have provided a dimension of humour. One example would be the solo playing of the trombonist Alan Tomlinson whose humour must be seen to be appreciated: he has, however, produced a fine solo recording (84). The combination of an intent face with wildly staring eyes and a style of playing ranging from the bombastic to the downright ridiculous (when 'irrelevant' appendages are fixed to open parts of the tubing to produce a crazy commentary on the conventional notes blown) — it is this combination of humour and deadly seriousness expressed in visual and aural terms which is disturbing. It could never be appreciated from a recording. Roger Turner the percussionist is another musician, the subtle humour of whose performances must be seen to be appreciated.

Let me turn to an area virtually impossible to treat at all on the basis of records: the visual and theatrical aspects of playing.

Theatre And Spectacle

Given their particular emphasis on the performer and openness to the unplanned, it is not surprising that a number of European improvisors, at least, have accentuated, not suppressed, the dramatic potential of their own performances — for instance Han Bennink and Tristan Honsinger whom I have already discussed (85).

Others have extended this in performances which are close to cabaret: for example Hugh Metcalfe's collaborations with the sound poet Bob Cobbing (86). Lol Coxhill is another improvisor noted not only for his ver-

(78) For instance, the precise formal and historical context which enables Bartok to satirise Shostakovich in his **Concerto For Orchestra**.

(79) For example, the devastating use of recorded snatches of characterless but jolly 'Radio 2' pap in 'Propaganda' from Fred Frith's **Technology Of Tears**. This record comprises composed music: for Frith's improvised work, see Note 53.

(80) A solo recording by Honsinger is on one side of the solo record referred to in Note 14.

(81) Respectively, **Solo Singing** (Rift, 1981 containing recordings from 1975 and 1980) and **Ruff** (Leo Records, 1986).

(82) I heard this used to powerful effect at a live performance by John Law's Singcircle in which Maggie Nicols' voice and semi-spoken mutterings was able to lift instrumental playing onto a level of collective inspiration which I rarely heard equalled live. The other players were John Law (piano), Robert Bellatalla (bass), Will Evans (percussion), Francine Luce (voice): the concert was at the Red Rose Club, London in March 1990.

(83) Stockhausen emphasised this capacity of the voice and in so doing formulated well the new approach to instruments in general which I outlined in the section **Virtuosity**: "The voice is a human being's best instrument. It stands outside any fashion. With the voice, one can shape *the entire range of possibilities between music and speech — from pure sounds to significant words*" (**Towards A Cosmic Music**, page 21) [My italics].

(84) **Still Outside** (Bead, 1981). The sleevenotes are excellent because they identify clearly how the works on record were created and avoid any mystification of the process of improvisation.

(85) Compare the pointed comment in 'Creativity And The Environment' by Trevor Wishart and Friends on the experience of performing in the open air (in the street or wherever): "The visual and theatrical aspects of the situation could no longer automatically be assumed to be irrelevant."

(86) They work under the title Birdyak: for example, **Aberration**, (Klinker Zoundz, 1988). On this recording Metcalfe in addition to the guitar plays percussion and electric drill, and sings through a gas mask. Lol Coxhill appears on one track.

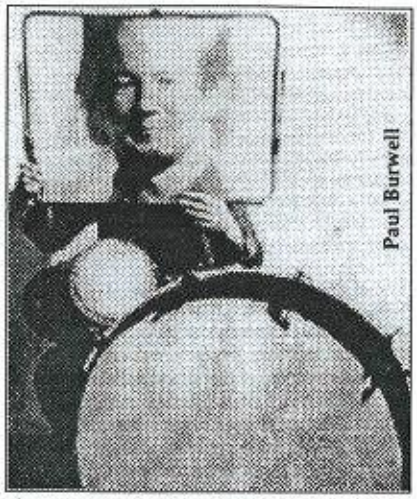


photo: **London Musicians' Collective**

(87) For example, the medley with Annick Nozati (voice) and Sven-Ake Johansson (percussion) on the double album **Instant Replay** (nato, 1982). He has also issued a 'play' called **Murder In The Air** on an EP!

(88) **The Technology Of Tears** (Note 79).

(89) See the sleevenote to **Writing On Water** (Note 64).

(90) **Redshift** by the group Coherents (Gerry Gold, Chris Green (saxes, clarinet and flute) Akemi Kuniyoshi-Kuhn (piano), Marcio Mattos and Will Evans), (Prime, 1986). As a subsidiary phenomenon, one American improviser (Davey Williams) has developed the use of visual cues in performance as a way of prompting himself to react spontaneously and change direction with forethought. These cues are sometimes visible not just to the performer but to the audience as well. This is just one of the improvisation techniques Williams has developed that shows an awareness of the possibilities of involving the audience in the process of improvisation. It has not been pursued in Britain to my knowledge (see Williams' comments on the sleeve note to his **Criminal Pursuits**, (Trans Music, 1985).

(91) Paul Burwell's purely instrumental work as a percussionist is illustrated by his cassette of improvisations with the cellist, Sarah Hopkins — **Integration** (1980) (originally issued by the London Musicians' Collective). Paul Burwell also played an important role in the organisation of support for free improvising musicians and was secretary of the London Musicians' Collective in the late 1970s: see his brief article in **Contact** No. 19, Summer 1978, pages 38-39.

(92) For instance, Jamie Muir (the percussionist) whose views on the use of 'junk' and the importance of not imposing preconceptions as to how it should sound are quoted by **Bailey**, page 119. Together Bailey and Muir have produced a record **Dart Drug** (Incus, 1981) which at its best contains a startling range of associations of buildings collapsing, storms, etc. Muir was also percussionist with the experimental rock group King Crimson.

(93) Again, this was an issue in the survey of improvisors quoted above (Note 10).

(94) In the essay 'Improvisation: Music For An Occasion' (see Note 18) at page 181.

bal wit (as compere at festivals) but for his collaboration in what one might call musical comedy sketches, that is theatrical events where improvised musical parody and collaboration are integral to the performance (87).

Fred Frith has also become increasingly involved in working with dance and creating work for theatre (88) although his work is generally composed. Phil Wachsmann frequently improvises as a live accompaniment to dance and is interested to explore the relationships between physical and musical gestures (89). Also worth mentioning, the group Coherents in the 1980s performed improvisations alongside displays of slides and film (90); although the music was not conceived as direct accompaniment to the visual stimulus.

Far more radical, however, in its combining of the musical, visual and theatrical is much of the work of Paul Burwell and other members of Bow Gamelan Ensemble (91). This group have integrated industrial noises (sirens, ships' horns), the clanking together of car wrecks, old vacuum cleaners, in short, junk of any kind, into a gamut of contraptions; their performance centres as much as anything on the illusion created of a mechanical world going its own way without need for performers (except as lighters of fuses, sometimes literally!). I have reflected above (in the section headed **Virtuosity**) on the implications of this and the work of Max Eastley. It is clear that each performance requires a considerable degree of planning (not least the 1989 performances on a barge moored at various places on or near the Thames). Yet the search for surprising aural significances in old, often disused material has much in common with the performing philosophy of AMM and the attitudes to junk of some other instrumentalists (92).

Bow Gamelan Ensemble have had considerable success in attracting a wider audience to their experiments. This is perhaps because they have grasped better than anyone else in British improvising since the Scratch Orchestra and the early outdoor performances of AMM, the scope for putting improvised music into a wider physical context. Most performances after all, in my experience, now take place by economic necessity in drab back rooms of pubs or the like, which give no stimulus whatsoever to audience or performers. The Scratch Orchestra frequently played in direct contact with the uninvolved public — for instance, along the cliffs at Beachy Head or in the forecourt of Kings Cross station. It is surely arbitrary to exclude this aspect of performance just as it would be arbitrary to insist that the performer played behind a screen! It provides yet another 'way in' for the audience and is a dimension of performance not sufficiently explored in Britain to date.

A rare exception has been the performances of the Diastolic Murmurs, a duo of Adam Bohman and the artist Crow. In these, various barely determinate and amplified sounds (scratchings, scrapings, crashes, screeches) are placed in a visual context suggesting an operating theatre or mortuary. The performers wear surgeons' or butchers' coats, medical slides are projected on to screens behind them, the colour staining the white coats as well. By this simple but effective means, aural explorations which share a common source with much of the other music discussed in this essay become open to a new form of visual or dramatic interpretation (suggesting perhaps a voyage inside the body) and, as a result, become more open as musical material also. This, I am sure, is an area whose promise has barely been explored.

Solo Work

A survey of British improvised music can hardly be complete without focusing for some time on solo playing: the British field has been particularly rich in exponents of solo work. By this I mean true solo work and not 'solos' in the sense used in jazz which are accompanied by the rest of the group.

It is worth mentioning at the outset an occasional debate amongst improvisors about the value of solo playing (93). The importance of group playing, the experience of the spontaneous exchange of ideas and signals between players, is undeniably a pleasure of improvisation, and for many comprises its primary reward. Eddie Prévost has argued that "improvisation is essentially a collective music making" (94). I think this goes too far. It might be more accurate to say that improvised music because created live is necessarily *open to the possibility* of collective participation, whereas composition is not.

In any event, solo playing has its special qualities. From the point of view of the listener, it can provide an especially clear view of the intuitions of a

original photo: **Dagmar Gebers**

particular improvisor at work; not surprisingly, therefore, I have relied quite heavily on the evidence of solo work in this essay. From the point of view of the performer, it offers an opportunity to focus attention on the development of a consistent "language" (as Derek Bailey has put it) or from a different perspective to focus on the sources of musical expression (Paul Dunmall) (95). Solo performance also offers listener and performer a more direct confrontation between the performance and the silence that surrounds the performance: this is a general, and, I argued frequently under-emphasised aspect of performance (see the section headed **Space/Time** above referring to Phil Wachsmann's solo work).

In the periods since 1965 and particularly since the mid-1970s, a number of performers have built up significant bodies of solo work on record — Derek Bailey, Barry Guy, Paul Rutherford, Evan Parker, Phil Wachsmann, Howard Riley, Keith Tippett and Fred Frith — and I have had occasion to describe the work of many of them in the course of this essay. Rather than deal with any in detail here, it is worth reflecting on *why* this development has been possible. It is connected with the increasing interest in exploring the hidden sound potential of standard instruments. Some players have taken this far enough to justify solo recording. There has not always been such a connection, however: percussionists such as Tony Oxley, Paul Lytton and Jamie Muir have taken the exploration of sound by additions to the standard kit to great lengths, but solo recordings by percussionists are rare.

In the section on **Virtuosity**, we saw how the extension of conventional instruments and the creation of new instruments has been a central feature of free improvisation in Britain. While sharing something in common with developments in classical music from the late 1950s onwards (and earlier in some exceptional cases such as Henry Cowell, Conlon Nancarrow and his experiments with the player piano, and above all Harry Partch), nonetheless the practice of free improvisation has gone further than classical music in one respect. In the use of junk, the admission as instruments of literally any object which can make a sound, and the developing of this as a consistent practice, an almost standard part of the 'repertoire', free improvisation has developed in a most distinctive direction.

The use of contact microphones (with or without various forms of electronic treatment) has opened up an area of sound production where percussion in the literal sense of hitting is only one option and where the idea of an instrument (that is an inherited and limited constellation of physical properties) loses much of its relevance. It is striking nonetheless that performers exploring this area have still in the main preferred to use a conventional instrument (or at least the relics of one) as a basis for their explorations. To take two examples: Keith Rowe's work on prepared guitar discussed on a number of occasions above; or among the younger generation of performers, Adam Bohman's work which centres around a prepared violin but encompasses a large range of sound objects which are laid out alongside it and may at any time be brought into the performance by contact with the violin strings or body (96).

In this context, the piano, so essential in the development of nineteenth century and early twentieth century classical music, is at a disadvantage and has not been a primary area of exploration. The relative inflexibility of the piano as an instrument and the heavy weight of its stylistic history have frequently led commentators to deny that it has a significant place in free improvisation (97). The work of the pianists Keith Tippett and Howard Riley, although using some prepared piano techniques, focuses primarily on rhythmic and harmonic development, the building of large improvised structures based upon the ability of the piano to achieve very subtle and gradual changes of sonority over extended periods of time and on a number of levels simultaneously (98). (One might almost say, however, that the prepared guitar has replaced the piano in this role.) Another pianist, Chris Burn has concentrated exclusively on various percussive treatments of the piano which are varied at great speed in performance (99).

Integrating preparations of the piano and its more conventional expressive resources is, to my mind, an area which is still relatively under-developed (100).

There are many aspects then to solo work in this period. What is undeniable is that it has flourished as a form and is a sign of the strong and continuing impetus towards exploration of sound that is an essential element in free improvisation.

(95) **Bailey**, pages 125ff. Paul Dunmall's comment is quoted in **The Improvisor** survey: "Solo playing is a very spiritual thing. The artist has to feel the power within him so that it can be passed on to the listener through the music."

(96) No recordings of Adam Bohman's solo work are yet available for general release. He is a member of the instrumental group Conspiracy: see Note 171, and the exclusively electronic group Morphogenesis (Note 170).

(97) For example, Mark Lockett in **Contact** No. 22, Summer 1981 reviewing Workshop Freie Musik Berlin 1980, and Keith Potter in **Contact** No. 21, Autumn 1980.

(98) For Keith Tippett's work see Notes 20 and 21. Howard Riley has issued many records. Two examples are **Shaped** (Mosaic, 1977) (solo piano) and **Improvisations Are Forever Now** (Vinyl, 1977) (with Barry Guy and Phil Wachsmann).

(99) **A Fountain Replete**, a cassette issued by Acta, 1988.

(100) I have made an attempt to explore the possibilities of this area in a cassette of solo piano music — **Sieve**, 1990.

original photo: **ACTA**

Work With Large Groups

Finally, I turn to improvisation in large groups. I have left this till last for two reasons: firstly, I do not regard such work as among the best or most interesting free improvisation (one exception, the work of King Übü, was discussed at the outset); secondly, it raises the most fundamental issues about the nature of improvisation which need to be addressed against the background of the rest of the available music.

Much of the work in this area has been in continental Europe although British musicians have frequently been involved. A prominent example for a number of years was the Globe Unity Orchestra, a free improvising 'big band' whose sheer size (fifteen players or so on some occasions) and instinct for virtuosic display (generally simultaneous from a large number of players) is perhaps why it yielded little of musical interest (101). Some structural discipline (not, as we shall see, necessarily imposed in advance by a composer) as well as economy in each individual's playing is surely essential to the success of improvised or semi-improvised work on this scale, as the more successful recordings of the groups of Maarten Altena or Misha Mengelberg referred to above demonstrate.

But even a compositional structure can bring problems: there may be an uneasy combination of the fixed form and (by a contrast which the very presence of a fixed form makes inevitable and detrimental) the 'undisciplined' improvisational content inserted into that form. Examples of this are the admirable but in my view ultimately unsuccessful attempt at composition for jazz orchestras by Barry Guy (102).

An apparent counter-example is the recording from 1980-81 by a group of 20 or so players (Community) (103) where the composition consists of a series of 'bits' scored for smaller groups which the performers are by and large free to combine as they wish. This idea has on the face of it considerable interest but the practical difficulties of negotiating a sequence of performance spontaneously among such a large group of players probably required that the cells consisted of comparatively simple material.

This indeed has the advantage of allowing the listener to hear quite clearly what is going on, but is outweighed by the sheer banality of the material at many points. It remains, however, a striking idea which to my knowledge has hardly ever been revived.

The issue is surely this: even if improvisation in large groups requires some degree of prior co-ordination, what type of co-ordination? Is it a co-ordination qualitatively different from the collaboration of instinct (developed through practising group playing) that is necessary in any improvising group, small or large? Or is a composer in a more conventional sense (a 'stage manager' of events) required?

The experiments cited above would suggest that a number of musicians have concluded that a composer of some sort is required. The same conclusion is suggested by the work of a recent British group, Ensemble, led by Chris Burn and including a number of players whom we have encountered elsewhere (John Butcher, Phil Durrant, John Russell, Marcio Mattos) (104). This group works with what it calls "skeletal structures" of composition by which certain events or focuses on particular instruments are predetermined by an individual 'composer'. More importantly, the group is quite explicit in telling the listener that this is the case, which suggests that it is seen as at least a possible virtue. The work of Ensemble may result in a revival amongst British improvisors of interest in exploring how improvisation can be combined with predetermined structures. How successful this work will be remains to be seen.

I would make just two comments on this approach here. First, there are difficult questions of emphasis which arise in such performances.The tendency of listeners to interpret music as if it were a composition is deeply ingrained. There is a risk that too explicit an emphasis on the composed structure will result in a confusion of message, and will detract from the open-endedness that is the essence of improvisation. As Derek Bailey has eloquently insisted, improvisation is not music aspiring to be mistaken for a composition (105).

Secondly, it is wrong, I believe, to think that composed structures are necessary to successful group improvisation. King Übü, a group of the same size as Ensemble (nine players more or less), do not rely on composed structures; their playing concentrates with remarkable success on the achieving of collective gestures and through them the suggesting of wider structures, in each case through group interaction of exceptional flexibility and immediacy of

(101) See, for example, **Improvisations** (Japo, 1977) and **Compositions** (ECM, 1979). There are some remarkable moments nonetheless: for instance, the closing sections of 'Improvisation 3' on **Improvisations** where the whole orchestra explodes in what I can only liken to a chorus of mating calls.

(102) For example, **Stringer** for the London Jazz Composers' Orchestra (FMP, 1983).

(103) Containing 'compositions' by Will Mentor and issued by Zizzle Records, 1981.

(104) Other musicians in Ensemble are Jim Denley (flute), Stevie Wishart (violin, hurdy-gurdy), and Matt Hutchinson (synthesizer). They have recently issued a CD **Cultural Baggage** (Acta, 1990).

(105) **Bailey**, page 48.

Sylvia Hallett

scan: **Chris Blackford**

response. This is the result of a refining of instinct through playing together for a considerable period.Their music illustrates a potential of large group playing to achieve complex sonorities and gestures of great amplitude which has hardly been explored. It should be remembered that powerful effects have been achieved by classical composers through allowing some degree of latitude to performers to improvise matters such as pitch even if within strict parameters: I am thinking, for example, of Ligeti's directions to the singers in his **Requiem**. How much might be achieved in large group improvisation using only the minimal principle of imitation, particularly between identical or similar instruments? This area has to my knowledge barely been explored. Implicit in these and my other comments is a personal view of what is distinctive about improvised music, a view about where its virtues might lie. At this point, I will attempt to state this view more explicitly, even if schematically. The statements that follow look dogmatic in form only for ease of exposition.These are not matters of dogma; each individual must formulate them independently.

Improvisation is not the making of a statement or the expressing of a view, even an implicit one (106). It is a form of shared attention to musical events as they occur: an openness to the unformed, as it forms. In this respect, at least, there is an analogy with other aspects of life which we take for granted: play, conversation. While each of these uses more or less extensive sets of rules, each is also open-ended and that is a principal reason for the pleasure it gives. If a conversation between friends were required to develop along a preset course this would defeat its object; openness and spontaneity are precisely the mark of conviviality. Conviviality occurs in a shared social space, where hierarchical distinctions are at least suspended. Conviviality in this sense is one virtue of improvisation; it is inimical to what I call the *hierarchical mode of thinking*. In this, it is not revolutionary; conviviality is the mark of music-making in many cultures.

It is difficult to undertake analysis without becoming implicated in a hierarchy of a different sort. Perhaps a hesitancy to claim any privileged status (as analyst) is one reason why so little analysis of improvised music has been undertaken. It is my belief, however, that improvised music cannot any longer do without such analysis if it is to receive the attention it deserves.

Music (whose meaning is rarely univocal) affords endless opportunity for the disclosure of new meanings and so openness in music may include an openness to such possibilities of disclosure. Improvisation is a form of music-making which attends to the possibility of such disclosures occurring in live performance. If of course you deny that possibility, you must consider improvisation an idle pursuit — I do not.

Improvisation is thus a form of attention whose openness is a necessary virtue. Any device which constrains that openness (for instance, by imposing rules on how attention is directed) runs the risk of undermining the very purpose of improvisation. So too does any attempt to reduce improvisation to a form of statement about the world or about society. Nor should it be graded in importance as against other musical activities, still less repressed as inferior. Improvisation is a human faculty which must be appreciated and enjoyed simply for what it is.

Section (a) of **Part Three** looks at how opposition to this proposition (so obvious when stated) could have seemed so strong.

(d) Summary

Let me first, however, summarise briefly the features which have emerged from this historical sketch.

There have been two main currents, overlapping but nonetheless distinct.

First, those musicians who have sought to establish a music which is free from any definite stylistic associations. They have valued obliqueness, avoided over-facility of expression. They have put considerable emphasis in their practice on the virtues of the performer's intense application to the technical resources of his or her instrument, and achieving very detailed interaction with other performers in group playing. Through these processes of group interaction, meanings are achieved and deep emotions given unexpected voice.

The second current comprises musicians who show less interest in achieving a special engagement with their instrument and have sometimes avoided specialising in any instrument. They have used group improvisations as an opportunity for exploring the dramatic potential of incongruities or clashes between different stylistic connotations. In this context, facility of expression is far from being a

(106) For a contrary view see Christopher Small's essay cited in Note 4.

original photo: **David Lister**

disadvantage: indeed it enables swifter and more accurate identification of thematic material by the listener. The engagement of listener and performer is invited at a more general level of interaction than line, texture or harmony; it is rather at the level of stylistic 'found objects' that the music works. Most importantly, this music does not appear to put any great emphasis on the possibility of the disclosure of meaning through live performance. Any meaning that it is disclosed is accidental, arising through a process of disengagement, not engagement. It immediately follows, however, that this effect can take place just as easily at a greater remove than separates the live performer from the audience. This approach to playing stands therefore to lose much less in the process of recording.

This comparison can be illuminated by anticipating some of the argument of **Part Three**. There I argue against any hierarchical relationship between performer and listener and in favour of an enhanced appreciation of the contribution of each to musical practice. But each contribution is very different and that of the listener too often ignored. This contrast can help us reformulate the difference between the two improvising approaches. For at the most basic level what distinguishes them is that the first approach concentrates most attention on the performer (the participant whose engagement with his or her instrument and the playing of others is the *sine qua non* of such improvisation); whereas the second achieves effects which are founded on comparison between stylistic material, and the release of new associations. But comparison is the particular privilege of the listener who may switch stations, change records and (if the equipment is available) layer one recording upon another. In other words, to oversimplify somewhat, the first approach starts its journey by positing an ideal performer, the second an ideal listener.

But, if I am right and the old hierarchical notions are to be discarded, any perspective from which one approach or the other can be dismissed as 'less important' vanishes and this is not a loss.

For it is *only* by recognising the distinct contribution of *each* aspect of musical activity (and the widely varying ways in which it can interact with the rest of life — not just the life of the composer, the virtuoso, the dedicated practitioner but also that of the sceptical and only partly engaged listener) that the capacity of music to expand sensibility and awareness can be fully recognised and acted upon.

PART THREE
The Virtues Of Improvisation

(a) Going Beyond The Hierarchical Mode

"It is better to make a piece of music than to perform one, better to perform one than to listen to one..." John Cage (107)

Cage, the staunch advocate of the democracy of sounds (the right of sounds to be just sounds), blithely asserts a hierarchy when it comes to the relations people make with sounds. The hierarchy is sheer dogma; it is this dogma which underlies much confused debate about musical practice, and which the specific practice of improvisation (among others) treats with a deserved contempt and through its persistence may help to dispel.

My discussion will at this stage relate specifically to western classical music, the primary context in which Cage's statement was made. In order to bring out the issues as clearly as possible, let me consider this hierarchy and what it involves in fairly schematic terms (it is, I believe, so widely and subliminally held that we at least owe Cage some thanks for stating it without obfuscation). Like any hierarchy it is preserved through the transmission of orders and involves a chain of command which can be made explicit even though it is compressed into a single object, the 'piece of music'.

The composer makes precise requirements of the performer usually coded in notation, the performer translates those requirements into a coded action which in turn makes precise demands of the listener. Any imperfection in this complex transmission process is in principle unacceptable since it contradicts the very function of the system, which is to ensure that instructions are transmitted accurately from the 'top' of the hierarchy to the 'bottom'.

The logic of the system is such that, if it were possible, the removal of the performer from the process (with the exception, perhaps, of the virtuoso, the hypothetical perfect transmitter) would be desirable (108). It is striking that even Earle Brown (who in the early 1950s was more advanced than virtually any other classical composer in his

(107) **Silence**, Calder & Boyars, 1973, page 64: this is an extract from an essay published in 1949 called 'Forerunners Of Modern Music'. The context of the quotation demonstrates that it is meant seriously. Whether Cage might later have disowned it is irrelevant to my argument.

(108) Compare the comment by Hans Georg Gadamer ('The Relevance Of The Beautiful In Art', pages 43-44 from **The Relevance Of The Beautiful And Other Essays**; translated by R Bernasconi, Cambridge University Press, 1977) in relation to the interpretation of already well-established works:

"One of the major confusions that the technical advances of our age have made possible, and that has affected artistic practice in certain countries with particularly centralised bureaucracies is the attempt to regulate performers so that the authentic version made by the composer or someone authorised by him becomes canonic along with all the particular tempi of that performance. In fact, the realisation of such a thing would spell the death of artistic reproduction and its substitution by means of some kind of technical equipment instead."

I do not know what Gadamer means by "particularly centralised bureaucracies" but the comment is certainly relevant here. Sometimes the performers get the message and offer to write themselves out of the process (for example, the comments of performers on the advisability of substituting electronic means for the performance of a Ferneyhough piece referred to in **Contact** No. 20, page 12).

appreciation of the importance of the contribution of performance to the process which composition begins) still expressed himself in terms of this model and hinted unwittingly at this very implication:

"It's my responsibility to try and condition their [the performers'] sensibility... I used to envy painters very much because they had their work in their hands, so to speak. They could see it. When you've done it, its in its real form. Writing music, you don't have the real thing. All you have are symbols." (109)

At the same time, Earle Brown is pleading implicitly for the autonomy of the composer, a point I revisit from a different perspective at the beginning of Section (b).

The purpose of this system then is the accurate repetition of a privileged message (who cares after all if the listener's reactions are accurately transmitted back to the composer?) (110). The composer's control of this process is at stake at all times (111).

Yet, in the 1950s and 1960s the classical avant-garde (and the hierarchical mode of thinking which was so much implicated in its very status) appeared to be in turmoil, and traces of this turmoil remain to the present day. The nature of control, its effectiveness, its precise purpose were all under challenge and yet its *necessity* or *desirability* was rarely challenged. The result was a period of extraordinary confusion: a crisscrossing of orders and counter-orders resembling nothing so much as an army in retreat.

This 'story' has already been well documented: Michael Nyman's **Experimental Music: Cage And Beyond** is particularly lucid. However, the complexity of the relations played out in this story makes it worth attempting a schematic description here:

(1) We can take, as a very general starting point, a developing aesthetic of complexity (I will define what I mean more closely in Section (c)). Composers came to be sensitive to an increasing range and density of information; the desire to control that information and its latent structures required a compositional process which made ever more precise demands on the composer, the performer and the listener. The role of serialism in this process is too well known to repeat here (112).

If serialism represented a high-point in the struggle of composers to formulate and transmit fully determinate musical intentions, the aesthetic of John Cage (which scorned the search for intentions or self-expression of any sort) was no less implicated in stretching the hierarchically determined roles of composer, performer and listener to breaking point. For as Cage pointed out (113), the composer in order to achieve a musical surface which demonstrably bears no relation to intention or desire, needs a compositional process which inevitably will generate instructions of great arbitrariness and (potentially, therefore) of great complexity. Indeed, only if the initial instructions inscribed in the composition are clear can chance operations in performance be graspable as they act on that basic material. As Cage says: "to ensure indeterminacy with respect to its performance, a composition must be determinate of itself." In fact, Cage represented an even purer form of the composer's desire for control than serialism since it was control for no expressive purpose. The 'purpose' of the composer if made explicit was to induce performer (and listener) to share the composer's wider intuition of the purposelessness of all things. Cage was alive to the resulting paradoxical status of composition but his compositions were not for that reason exempt from the crisis in relationships between composer and performer which I am outlining.

(2) The increasingly complex (and often counter-intuitive) demands made of performers by composers put great strains on performers who had few means of resistance: those available were themselves increasingly appropriated by the composer. In earlier times, the advantage of a standard notation had been that once the initial effort to grasp the precise musical material had been made, the resulting work of executing the instructions was the clear province of the performer; the score recognised this by leaving sufficient aspects un-annotated, a space, in other words, in which the performer could 'develop an interpretation'.

However, this space became increasingly constricted, first by the development of ever more minutely determined intentions of the composer which in turn led to radically more complex notation. Perhaps some of Brian Ferneyhough's music represents the far point of this process. In most music of the preceding two centuries, complexities of notation had never precluded in principle the possibility of the gifted performer skipping the process of preparation and going straight to the

(109) From a conversation with Derek Bailey quoted at **Bailey**, page 80.

(110) I am referring here to what Jacques Attali considers to be the third stage of the abstract development of musical practice that he traces in **Noise**: the stage of repetition. His account puts special emphasis on repetition as the exchange of already finished musical 'goods' and in particular the recording process. He, therefore, concentrates on the encroaching of the economic sphere on artistic 'production', the imperative to produce exchangeable and, therefore, homogeneous products. It might, therefore, be thought that he would suggest that the removal of music from the sphere of monetary exchange would release it from the repetition compulsion. But in fact the process of repetition goes deeper as noted above: it is locked into the very concept of musical communication which prevails. The music work is a frozen form of repetition before it is recorded and before (in this latter sense) it is repeated. Artaud's criticism of the role of the text in traditional theatre comprised a rejection of a similar structure of repetition (see for example the texts quoted by Jacques Derrida, **Writing And Difference**, trans. Alan Bass Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978, pages 245-7). But the issue is a general one. On the connected issue of the low status accorded to the listener's reactions, compare Michel Foucault's comment in relation to normal literary discourse on "the dissymmetry that is asserted between 'creation' and any use of the linguistic system" (from 'The Order Of Discourse' trans. Ian Macleod, reprinted in **Untying The Text**, ed. Robert Young, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971, page 63). And see Note 135.

(111) Earle Brown: "The degrees of control I could imply through very vague implications... these qualities of control interested me" (**Bailey**, page 79).

(112) Particularly effective is the account in Christopher Small's **Music, Society, Education** since it brings out the tensions within serialism which existed in the very beginning.

(113) **Silence**, page 38. Compare the account from the perspective of the performer by John Tilbury (quoted in **Nyman**, pages 13-14).

end result ('sight-reading'). Yet, for instance, some of Ferneyhough's solo compositions exclude the possibility of sight-reading in principle (by being written on more staves and information dimensions than a human performer can conceivably reproduce without "taking the notation to pieces", in other words by a simulated act of re-composition): the flautist, Kathryn Lukas, an experienced performer of Ferneyhough's work, comments on this loss without apparent irony (114). Why is this a loss? Because even in principle it has become impossible for the performer to have a feeling of spontaneity while performing.

Paradoxically, however, the performer's space in the musical process was also constricted by the development of experiments with notation which on the face of them appeared to give the performer greater flexibility of interpretation (I have in mind, of course, the many experiments with visual and verbal scores in the 1950s and 1960s). For this process, just as much as the development towards very precise notation, drew the performer into the realm of the composer ever more completely, both at the level of developing new techniques of execution specific to individual works and at the level of unravelling the initial message comprised by an individual work. In other words, composers by *stipulating* areas of freedom for the performer only succeeded in defining more precisely the limits of the performer's service.

(3) A similar process can be seen at work in the relationship between composer and listener. In the case of many compositions, the listener, even to acquire a *basis* for interpretation, is required to reconstruct the surface material which a performance and even the score to which it relates presents: the listener in other words must participate in the composer's work (or at least simulate it by a form of 'shadow' composition). This involves not just reading the score but reconstructing the processes which generated it, often with elaborate effort.

We have already seen Brian Ferneyhough's comments that the listener must reconstruct the 'real time' of the composition process. It is echoed by another composer, Gavin Bryars (115). Its daunting effect is openly acknowledged for instance in Keith Potter's short piece on Ferneyhough's **Sonatas for String Quartet**; Potter, a sympathetic listener, acknowledges that until he has completed the archaeological process which he takes to be required of him, he is paralysed in the act of interpretation (116). The debilitating effect of this process on the very possibility of 'musical appreciation' has been remarked upon trenchantly by Trevor Wishart (117) who criticises the tendency "to make complicated compositional procedures the very basis of style and aesthetic, and hence of 'appreciation', regardless of their effectiveness. It is demanded of the listener that he hear the procedures, and hearing them is supposed to constitute the musical experience. This view, which puts the composer effectively beyond any essentially musical criticism, is of course rejected by most people, as it should be." (118)

(4) Perhaps because the relationship of composer and performer necessarily involves face to face contact, some composers have felt it necessary to apologise, as it were, for the situation outlined in paragraph 2. They have admitted that they were not concerned that *all* the detail contained in the score was correctly reproduced (119). But once more Brian Ferneyhough (he is not alone in this) has taken the thought of a stage further by claiming that the *necessary* failure of the performer (attempting in good faith to comply with impossible instructions) is what gives rise to the surface result that the composition intends (120). The composer in other words insists on the importance of requirements on the performer *as if* those requirements constituted the whole intention to be realised by the piece, while simultaneously asserting the pointlessness of the performer's attempt when seen from the only perspective (that of a striving for perfect execution) which the hierarchical mode allows to the performer.

Brian Ferneyhough is simply too acute a critic of the implications of musical practice to be unaware of the obvious accusation of bad faith which suggests itself, and we need not pursue his ultimate intentions here (perhaps his aim is indeed to cast doubt on the transmission model which we have outlined: if so, it is a paradox that his music makes such intense demands on the habits which that model has generated). The point is that the provisional acceptability of Ferneyhough's device indicates a relationship (between composer and performer) which is in crisis: the composer is entitled to achieve 'interesting results' by asking from the performer a commitment based on an

(114) In **Contact** No. 20, Autumn 1979, page 12. However, not every performer has been so charitable. Compare, Anthony Pay's candid description of the specialised performer of avant garde music as "a machine of a certain sort" (**Bailey**, page 72), Cardew's bitter description of the impositions on him of Cage's piano score in **HPSCHD** (**Stockhausen Serves Imperialism**, page 40); or Stockhausen's related and sympathetic comment on performers who have become "living tape recorders" (**Towards A Cosmic Music**, page 35).

(115) **Contact** No. 22, Summer 1981, page 6. Compare also Chris Dench's comments which (to be fair) may represent more his own views as a listener rather than necessarily an approach he would impose upon the listener to his music (Richard Toop 'Four Aspects Of The New Complexity', **Contact** No. 32, Spring 1988, page 20).

(116) **Contact** No. 20, Autumn 1979, pages 5-9. Kevin Potter's comments are refreshingly honest. But it brings out the absurdity of the expectations being made on listeners or apparently being made, when it is considered that I and a number of colleagues have gained great enjoyment from Ferneyhough's sonatas without any analysis or even the attempt at it.

(117) **Journey Into Space Travelogue** (an antiscore) 1975.

(118) Norbert Weiner made the same point in the 1940s in relation to computer programmes, whose ability to generate conclusions, he predicted correctly, would soon outreach the capacity of the human mind to analyse how those conclusions were arrived at and, therefore, evaluate them (see Joseph Weizenbaum, **Computer Power And Human Reason**, Penguin Books, 1976, page 233, who quotes this passage and whose comments on this and related subjects make illuminating reading in the context of debates about the growing technical apparatus of 'composition').

(119) Ligeti's cheery comment to the Arditti Quartet attempting his **Second Quartet** was "play like crazy! It does not matter if there are a few wrong notes here and there!" (From Richard Scott's interview with Rohan de Saram quoted above — Note 53).

(120) See the passage quoted in Lukas' article in **Contact** No. 20, which has frequently been quoted elsewhere. Cardew made a similar comment on the music of La Monte Young but his comment is from the perspective of the performer and the 'failure' in question is the failure to produce 'uniformity'; it is, therefore, patently one which both performer and composer could appreciate (quoted in **Nyman**, page 14). The guitarist Davey Williams has developed an explicit improvisation technique based around precisely this which he calls the "hummingbird technique" (see the sleevenote to **Criminal Pursuits** referred to in Note 90).

explicitly false premise. (You have only to imagine how audiences would react to a similar 'trick' being performed upon them.)

(5) Yet the extension of the composer's control does not mask a crisis in the composer's own self-image. Composers increasingly came to recognise the impossibility of total control over their material, and some saw this as a cause for despair (121). On the other hand, some composers questioned the desirability of total control and recognised the uneliminable contribution which performers had to make to the production of the desired musical result: Karlheinz Stockhausen, Earle Brown, Christian Wolff and Cornelius Cardew. Stockhausen in particular developed a specious ethic of 'serving' the performer by enhancing his or her sensibilities, even inducing a spiritual reawakening. Cornelius Cardew was able to express a comparable ideal with an appropriate degree of irony (122) but many composers were not: the role of the composer as a spiritual leader is crucial to Stockhausen's defence of his intuitive music (123).

(6) Few composers, however, went so far as to extend this specious ethic to the relationship of composer to listener, and the awakening of sensibilities desired was generally a closed loop between composer and listener. Any breaking of that loop would have involved the acknowledgement of the independent right of the listener (whose commitment to the whole process is naturally more tenuous) to reject the composition or reuse it for different ends, and that was a step few were prepared to countenance (124). No more structured response was available to the listener than indifference.

(7) It is obvious, however, that a composer who is seen mainly as an awakener of performer sensibilities is *dispensable*, at least if one can stand outside the abstract model of transmission of information presented at the outset of this section (125). There are, after all, any number of *other* ways through which performers can refine their intuitions: through wide listening, performing without scores, listening to other performers, in group improvisation, even meditation (126). The composer at the extreme of this process (represented by the flood of 'word scores' in the 1960s) has become an option, no more: some composers (such as Stockhausen) may have had at the time the charisma to convince others that the composer in this role was still necessary. But clearly this was a matter of accident; the thought could only have taken hold in a more elaborate caste system than we in fact enjoy. The composer in other words had written himself out of the 'script': it was hardly surprising that some performers did so more emphatically — by improvisation without the aid of the composer.

(8) Yet, far from feeling free to dispense with this contradictory role composers were reinforced in it by other pressures. It is striking how composers in describing their activities have used language which reflects the sphere of economic activity, the everyday world of work (particularly administrative work). Thus Gavin Bryars talks of 'researching' both the musical and the non-musical aspects of his work **The Sinking Of The Titanic** (and becoming more engrossed in the latter!) (127). James Dillon talks of "calculations" (128); Chris Dench freely acknowledges the need to "mechanise" certain aspects of composition (129) although ironically (given the comments above on the strains to which the composer-performer relationship was subject to) this mechanisation is at least in part to increase the performer's own sense of involvement with the process of composition once the mechanistic formulas have run their course. Similarly, Kathryn Lukas talks of herself as a performer "processing a work, of the contract that exists between a performer, composer and the piece" (130).

From within this administrative perspective, it is little wonder that the composer's role was not subject to the questioning it deserved. I am reminded of Weber's great denunciation of the false yet self-perpetuating conceptions that bureaucracy has of itself:

"No one knows who will live in this cage [ie, the encroachment of the economic sphere into all aspects of life] in the future, or whether at the end of this tremendous development entirely new prospects will rise, or there will be a great rebirth of old ideas and ideals or, if neither, mechanised petrification, embellished with a sort of convulsive self-importance. For the last stage of this cultural development, it might well be said: 'specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart; this nullity imagines that it has attained a level of civilisation never before achieved'." (131)

(9) Given the pressures on the composer's status in this hierarchy, it is hardly surprising that composers were critical of musicians that absented

(121) For example, Boulez's comments in the article 'Alea' in **Perspectives Of New Music** Vol 3 No 1, 1964, pages 42-53.

(122) See his amusing comments in the notes to the composition **Octet 61 For Jasper Johns**:

"If the most important function of a composer were the stimulation of an interpreter, this piece would be a composition. The stimulation of the interpreter is a facet of composition that has been disastrously neglected..."

He describes the piece, in tongue-in-cheek marketing rhetoric, as "an opportunity for the performer."

(123) **Towards A Cosmic Music**, pages 7 ff.

(124) Again, Cardew was an exception. The passage quoted in Note 122 continues:

"While performed the piece may be judged as a musical experience (sounds brought together by a human agency) and thrown down the drain."

(125) A distant parallel to this challenge to the role of the composer in the authority structure of music might be the undermining of the concept of the philosopher as the arbiter and legislator of the arts and sciences which Richard Rorty has attempted (**Philosophy And The Mirror Of Nature**, Princeton University Press 1979, especially pages 389-394).

(126) One of the word-scores in the collection **Aus Den Sieben Tagen** by Stockhausen famously contains an instruction to meditate! The idea that the composer could be a privileged giver of such instructions reveals the absurdity of the composer/performer/listener hierarchy in this context.

(127) **Contact** No. 22, page 10.

(128) **Contact** No. 32, page 40: "Yes, I can't calculate unless I have a fairly strong notion of what I am trying to do."

(129) *ibid.* page 20 describing his use of 'charts'.

(130) See her article in **Contact** No. 20, referred to at various points already. Not surprisingly given the above analysis, composers use the same language in talking of the performer's relationship to them or the composition: it comprises a "task" (Alvin Lucier quoted in **Nyman**, page 13) or "obligations" (in the score of Cage's **Variations III**).

(131) **The Protestant Ethic And The Spirit Of Capitalism**, trans. Talcott Parsons, Allen & Unwin London/Sydney 1930, page 182. For all the salutary ferocity of Weber's polemic, there is no disgrace in living in this "cage": but its consequences must be examined. The effects of professionalisation have been studied in many areas.

Maggie Nicols performing outside Kings Cross station, London 1993 (photo: **Rob Jacobs**).

themselves from the hierarchical chain of command, those improvisers that did not work to order but started moving of their own accord. Luciano Berio dismissed improvisation "as a haven of dilettantes" which "normally acts on the level of instrumental praxis rather than musical thought" (132). Pierre Boulez made more attempt to argue the case (133): he claims that improvisation inevitably depends exclusively on the recycling of what is contained in the performer's memories, and this is a point which has been acknowledged by improvisers themselves although the practice of improvisation as I hope I have demonstrated provides plenty of evidence to the contrary. I do not particularly wish to take issue here with the details of these views. The point is rather that composers saw fit to attack the practice of improvisation when, in fact, it is far from obvious that there should be any opposition between the two. Would not a mutual respect of differences be a more acceptable starting point for discussion?

The hierarchical assumptions with which I began this section can be seen to have many complex consequences. They are baseless assumptions but that does not mean automatically that they are to be rejected; still less can the professionalisation of society (from which they derive) be wished away. If they are to be countered, it is necessary to develop and abide by an alternative conception of musical practice. Improvisation is part of this new conception. What is at stake is autonomy: the autonomy of all who participate in the process of making music, composer, performer and listener. And this is much more than a question of switching academic labels. It is a matter of re-examining the social domain in which music is made; once cleared of irrelevant values, it looks very different. As André Gorz has said (the whole of his work **Critique of Economic Reason** is devoted to expounding the point):

"Freedom consists less (or rather consists less and less) in freeing ourselves from the work we need to do to live and more in freeing ourselves from heteronomy, that is, in reconquering spaces of autonomy in which we can will what we do and take responsibility for it." (134).

We must see that it is the hierarchical mode, the network of real or imaginary obligations which it comprises, that has generated the absurd posturings and the mutual recriminations that we have just been examining. None of this bears the faintest relevance to aesthetic issues of any importance. We must discard the hierarchical mode of thinking from our reflections on what music is (135). This includes avoiding hierarchical language in defending improvisation (I have in mind Eddie Prévost's concept of the aesthetic *priority* of improvisation). Once it is discarded, aesthetic issues which *do* matter can be addressed clearly: similarities of sensibility between composed and improvised music can be noticed for what they are (**Part Two** Section (b)).

I will examine some of the arising issues shortly. But before I do so, let me survey the ground cleared once irrelevant hierarchical notions have been discarded. We can now see music as a series of overlapping practices: *composing* (that is, the construction through a complex process of reflection, of musical models for performance but which by no means require actual performance); *performing* (which may involve the realisation of prior instructions from a composer or may be improvisational); *listening* (which may have many forms: listening to and watching a live performance, listening to recordings at home, and other not sufficiently recognised various forms of *'transformative listening'*, that is the reuse of heard material through comparison, reflection, verbal description or editing). The listener's role deserves more attention than it normally receives. The listener's role is as much comparison for reuse as message reception.

Not only is there no hierarchical relationship between these three elements in musical practice but each can involve the others. The composer who never listens to the works of others would rarely succeed as a composer. Less obviously, it is open to listeners to develop a process of 'composition' or reconstruction of new material through listening to material produced by others. This is the radical significance in conceptual terms of hip-hop which developed into a new form of popular music partly from the practice of disc-jockeys of mixing, cutting and distorting records in live performance. This form of musical intervention is certainly not composition or performance in the conventional sense, but is close to a heightened form of listening in which the listener's role as a potentially creative transformer of recorded material is itself dramatised, thus turning

(132) Luciano Berio, **Two Interviews** (see Note 3).

(133) **Conversations With Celestine Deliege**, see Note 26.

(134) **Critique Of Economic Reason**, Verso Books 1989, page 166.

(135) On the importance of disregarding the hierarchical mode of thinking, compare Small page 150. In the field of literary analysis, this has of course been a major theme in the writings of Roland Barthes and others: the undermining of the privileged status of the author or the literary work, a new emphasis on the process of reading, indeed the insistence "on the (productive) equivalence of writing and reading" (Roland Barthes, 'Theory Of The Text', trans. Ian Macleod reprinted in **Untying The Text**, page 42). I would not claim to be qualified to pronounce on the success of Barthes' projected revolution in literary theory but it seems to me self-evident that a similar shake-up of the hallowed concepts of musical criticism would be no bad thing.

photo: **Jak Kilby**

back on itself the one-way chain of command that I have sought to criticise. Hip-hop is the first major musical form to develop without a significant instrumental component (136).

Similarly, the performer is also a listener who can not only react in live performance to fellow performers but also can integrate into performance a compositional attitude analogous to that of the transformative listener. This, I suggest, is the correct perspective from which to interpret the experiments in style-mixing and related areas described in **Part Two**. More generally I believe that the central aesthetic of improvisation consists precisely in a transformation of the performer into an explorer of sound, *simultaneously listening and performing*: this point emerged in relation to AMM's approach to form and I will return to it in Section (c). Stockhausen summed this up better than anyone when he described how:

"Collective intuition produces qualities that you [ie, the composer] can't otherwise achieve. When musicians are not too much bound by instructions, then they react to the sound itself. They could never say why they did it that way. They just did it in the moment they were listening." (137)

There is no privileged perspective on the process of music making as a whole. It follows from this that:

(1) The composer has no right to expect a particular type of treatment from the performer (it is a matter of agreement, contract if you like, or if the composer is dead, of the performer's choice) (138);

(2) Neither the composer nor the performer has any right to expect a particular type of response or attention from the listener;

(3) As a development of (2) both composer and performer must respect the freedom of the listener to develop a mode of interpretation which has nothing in common with their original intentions;

(4) The listener in turn must respect the freedom of both composer and performer to act for reasons and on motives which have nothing *in principle* to do with the communication of any specific message to the listener.

None of this is to suggest the undesirability or impossibility of communication through music. How could it not be desirable? It is to insist that only when the notion that one participant in the musical process has automatic claims (contractual rights, as it were) on another is discarded, can musical communication be perceived in its full multiplicity. This is, however, only the beginning, and not the end, of debate on aesthetic issues of significance.

(b) Improvisation's Virtues

"I have no reservations about the value of improvisation. To me it has been the single most liberating factor of my life; socially, politically and musically." Tony Oxley (139)

Let us return to focus more closely on improvisation itself. What is it that the improviser is aiming for? Improvisors having fought hard for their autonomy as performers have naturally spent considerable time in addressing issues of self-definition, and I have tried to show how these are implicit in much of the music. It is time to look at this debate in more explicit terms.

Derek Bailey is quite blunt about what the improvisor is *not* trying to produce: a performance that aspires to be mistaken for a composition. He insists, in other words, on the specific virtues of improvisation being noticed and not betrayed.

We should note in passing a consistency in the way performers and composers express their purposes in spite of perhaps diametrically opposed attitudes to the significance of live performance. Richard Toop's illuminating debate with and analysis of four contemporary British composers (Michael Finnissy, Chris Dench, Richard Barrett and James Dillon) (115) seems to unearth among these composers a similar insistence on the autonomy of the process of composition, its special combination of reflection and discipline in the face of a daunting complexity of material. It is striking how little attention in this discussion the possible responses of listeners receive. Indeed, one composer, Chris Dench, (in remarks to which I have already alluded (115)) speaks as if the key problem for the *composer* is to retain control of the process of composition, to remain involved in it, a striking parallel to the way in which so many performers have spoken when faced with the instructions of composers. Each of the composers appreciates the problematic connection between their activity and the process of performance. This does not imply they are disinterested in the latter. Richard Barrett, for instance, is active in improvised music.

Gavin Bryars gave an even more fundamental emphasis to the act of

(136) Public Enemy are one of the leading exponents: see Note 159.

(137) **Towards A Cosmic Music**, page 7. Implied here is an acknowledgement of the creative role of listening, of listening as implying more than mere reception. Compare Raymond Williams **The Long Revolution**, Pelican Books 1965, Chapter One, especially pages 51-53.

(138) As Evan Parker puts it (**Bailey**, page 56): "If the score represents some kind of ideal performance, why does it ever have to be performed?" This at the very least illustrates that the relationship between score and performance is a matter of debate.

(139) Quoted by **Bailey**, page 157.

composition by eliminating performance (or the production of a performable object) as a significant part of his musical production. Also, Keith Potter sums up this attitude in his sympathetic account of Bryars' music (140):

"The Work, if it exists, is a conceptual construct not subject to the laws of perception only, even though it is in part rooted in them. This contributes to the blurring of the distinction between percept and concept, between a musical object and the thinking that gave rise to it."

Provided we do not allow the composer to legislate for musical practice as a whole, Bryars' approach can be respected as an affirmation of the autonomy of the composer, analogous to the stance adopted by improvising performers (141). Each of the overlapping processes comprised in music holds out its promise as an autonomous activity and it is this that practitioners in each process are rightly seeking to defend.

The improvisor sees benefits in giving particular attention to live performance. Alan Durant (142) usefully summarises three specific advantages which various improvisors have emphasised (although clearly the same player might not recognise all as important): *freedom*, *discovery* and *dialogue*. It is worth looking briefly and critically at each of these.

Freedom. We have come across various suggestions of this view of improvisation and its virtues in this essay. Each improvisation in principle may rest unconnected with any other: there is no set of written instructions available to the listener which could generate such connections. No body of work, no predetermined intentions are required for the successful reception of a performance by an audience at a particular place and time. The success of an improvisation does not require that it successfully repeats or can successfully be repeated. As a result, the continued practice of improvisation allows the performing musician to develop tastes or ideas (which may or may not have links with compositional ideas) *without* conforming to received wisdom or the practice of others.

It would of course require a performer of unusual insensitivity to go on playing year after year without receiving *any* response from audiences. The performer at the most basic level requires from the audience a sharing of attention (143); and this requires not just a consistent social context of some sort in which the process can take place, but prior to that an expectation shared between performer and listener of an experience which both consider worth having and which motivates the establishment and maintaining of that social context. In other words (and there is no space here to defend its usage, given the multiple fallacies with which it is associated), 'communication'; a space for the 'magic moments' of which so many improvisors speak (144). Magic, I suppose, because their arrival is not programmed, and yet once they have occurred they transform the perceptions of performers and listeners alike of what has gone before. It is analogous moments that we rely upon to transform or at least enlighten the rest of our lives.

Freedom is therefore necessarily linked to *dialogue*. As Eddie Prévost puts it, improvisation requires "a sympathetic social-musical environment" (145). This environment is provided by fellow players as much as by the audience: the social aspects of group playing have been emphasised from its earliest days and John Stevens in Britain was forthright in directing attention to this through his playing and through the various workshops which he organised over the years (145).

Discovery is more problematic. Boulez is surely talking only practical sense when he points out that the performer cannot be constantly inventive *in performance*: Ornette Coleman's aim of "playing without memory" is at best a metaphor. The crucial qualification is, however, "in performance". For the importance of preparation (of instruments, of methods of playing, of mental attitudes) has consistently been emphasised by many improvisors although not by all. It is quite clearly *not* incompatible with spontaneity: preparation is a means of generating new forms of spontaneity. To make any sense of *discovery* in this context, we must break it down into three components. First, *discovery* in a transcendental sense, the awakening of intuition through 'magic moments', referred to above. Secondly, what is more accurately described as the *assimilation* of discoveries in and through performance (both the performer's own and those of others). In a world where there is a bewildering mass of musical information, some of it genuinely new (and much more of it claiming to be), the role of improvisation as a process of assimilation is vital. Improvisation can provide performers and listeners with the means to play 'alongside' and ulti-

(140) **Contact** No. 22, Summer 1981, page 10, and compare Bryars' own observation (**Bailey**, page 136): "It [ie, improvisation] is not a conception. I am more interested in conception than in reality."

(141) Richard Barrett also usefully sums up the concern of composers with autonomy when he states that his compositions are intended as inclusive, they should include a whole range of things of importance to him as a person during the period of composition (see the article of Richard Toop referred to in Note 115).

(142) 'Improvisation In The Political Economy Of Music' in **Music And The Politics Of Culture** edited by Christopher Norris, Lawrence and Wishart, 1989 (referred to here as **Norris**). An earlier version of that essay is included in the booklet referred to in Note 4.

(143) Martin Heidegger makes this point with a characteristic combination of extreme abstraction and earthy practicality in 'On The Origin Of The Work Of Art': "To submit to this displacement [ie, of audience and viewer from the ordinary mode of seeing or hearing] means to transform our accustomed ties to world and earth and henceforth to restrain all usual doing and prizing, knowing and looking, in order to stay within the truth that is happening within the work. Only the restraint of this staying lets what is created be the work that it is. This letting the work be a work we call the preserving of the work." (**Poetry Language Thought**, trans. Albert Hofstadter, Harper & Row 1971, page 66)

(144) The phrase is taken from a response of Ken Hyder in the survey published in **The Improvisor** referred to in Note 10 above.

(145) 'The Aesthetic Priority Of Improvisation', page 32. This environment is an interpretative environment, however flexible and non-hierarchical it may be. It is perhaps misleading to suggest as John Stevens did (**Search And Reflect**, Music Workshop Handbook, page 2) that "the person who uses a sound as a musical statement is the *only* possible judge of whether it is musically valid or not." [My italics] That is not to say, however, that there is always (or likely to be) a complementarity between the different "ways of hearing" which a particular performance brings together: that is clearly false (as Attali remarks, in **Noise**, page 145). Perhaps it is this latter insight which excuses Attali's bizarre statement that music in the era of 'composition' is "something fundamentally outside all communication" (page 32), a statement which he elsewhere corrects (page 143). Richard Barrett makes a similar point in relation to concert performances of work of new composers in Richard Toop's article cited earlier.

(146) I noted above the degree of common language between free improvisation and the classical avant garde. It is also striking that the boundaries which were once quite sharply drawn between 'popular' music and the classical avant-garde have increasingly been broken down, as is demonstrated by the practice of the "jazz and new music magazine" **Wire**, which, no doubt for good commercial reasons, covers a considerable amount of classical avant-garde music.

(147) Derek Bailey makes a similar point when he states that improvisation is not necessarily or even primarily experimental (**Bailey**, page 92). For a general criticism of the dogma which associates 'newness' with great art see Raymond Williams, *op. cit.* pages 46-51.

(148) Or as Christopher Small puts it (in relation to individual performances) a journey which is not completed before the listener or performer becomes involved (**Small**, page 176). In 1979 Joseph Beuys (quoted in Caroline Tisdall, **Joseph Beuys**, New York, 1979, page 7) made an eloquent statement of the same viewpoint in relation to sculpture: "Sculpture as an evolutionary process: everyone as an artist. That is why the nature of my sculpture is not fixed and finished. Processes continue in most of them: chemical reactions, fermentations, colour changes, decay, drying up. Everything is in a state of change." Viewed from the opposite end of the process: "All words, once spoken, are dead and function only at the moment they are uttered" (Artaud).

(149) Cornelius Cardew, 'Towards An Ethic Of Improvisation', page xviii; **Bailey**, page 51; for a different but related point see Tom Mandel's comment on Henry Kaiser's method of improvisation (sleevenote to **Aloha**, Metalanguage, 1981): "Because there is so much choice so quick, Kaiser's music starts at every moment and is very world-like in that."

(150) Compare Small's description of the practice of musicians of the Chopi people in Mozambique (**Small**, page 57) who feel no concern in allowing old compositions to be erased in the collective memory by new ones, like a tape constantly reused.

(151) It is a fallacy to suggest (as Ken Hirschcop does) that no art can adequately reflect a sense of dissatisfaction of society except by *forms* which are themselves incomplete in some sense ('The Classical And The Popular' in **Norris**, page 302). He says: "The essence of a contribution to a musical dialogue should be an internal incompleteness." This is precisely to impose the false rhetoric of 'statements' onto an artistic process which (mutely) demonstrates the irrelevance of that rhetoric.

(152) Compare the guitarist Henry Kaiser's description of his own practice: "I try to improvise the structure of the music, on the grammatical level, instantly as I play" (sleevenote to **Aloha** — see Note 149).

(153) The latter romantic notion mars the otherwise extremely level-headed reflections of Christopher Small's book, see particularly page 209.

(154) **Small**, page 180.

(155) The metaphor of 'space', in the form of a desire to inspire a move from 'occupied' to 'created space', featured in the programme of the 1960s improvisation group Musica Electronica Viva (Frederick Rzewski, Richard Teitelbaum and Allan Bryant: see **Nyman**, pages 110-111). Hans Blumenberg in a highly abstract but essentially similar formulation owing something to Heidegger has written of the importance of 'rhetoric' (in a very broad sense mately stand 'inside' radical musical developments (some of course deriving from composition), in a way that the rigid hierarchical relationship of composer/performer/listener simply does not contemplate (146).

Thirdly, the generation in performance of further possibilities of previously formulated ideas. I return to this aspect of improvisation below. Since there is no sharp dividing line between development and invention here or anywhere else, live improvisation may be said to yield discoveries in a straightforward sense. The point, however, I wish to make is that it is misleading to see such 'discovery' as intrinsic to improvisation *unless* one is referring to one individual's practice of improvisation over a long period and even then its accuracy as a description results from choice, and is not a matter of definition (147).

But each of these 'advantages' put forward for improvisation is a process (148). Improvisation is not concerned with the production of stable objects: its objects are not transferable, or retransmittable without loss. As a result, and as noted at the beginning of this essay, it can have no true historian, any more than there can be a historian of laughter. Its worth cannot be measured along dimensions of historical progress or failure (an obvious disadvantage when it comes to grant applications).

Indeed, its very ephemerality has been put forward by some performers as a fundamental advantage. The argument here, I suppose, is that its own nature more adequately reflects the true nature of social interaction, even of life itself (149). I doubt that such points can be convincingly developed except by reference to matters of personal philosophy which are beyond the scope of this essay. What matters here is that the practice of improvisation is able to accept its own irrelevance to any conjectural grand history of society as a whole; while busy assimilating what others produce, it refuses to be assimilated or labelled itself. From this perspective, it can discard its own products if it wishes (150).

But this does not mean that the *practice* of improvisation can be discarded or ignored for it is precisely this radical attitude to what normally passes for cultural history that is part of its importance. This attitude is expressed not so much in statements of any sort, but by a consistent practice (151) whose spirit Jacques Attali eloquently expresses in his description of an era (which he calls the era of composition) in which there is a fundamental change of attitudes to the making of music:

"[Composition is] not a new music but a new way of making music... not a return to ritual. Nor to the spectacle. Both are impossible. No. It is the advent of a radically new form of the insertion of music into communication... doing solely for the sake of doing... inventing new codes, inventing the message at the same time as the language." (**Noise**, page 134) (152)

As Attali clearly points out, this is neither an escape into solipsism nor a reaching out for lost forms of community or "communality" (153).

Improvisation is not a 'movement' with a programme of any sort. It is fundamentally misleading (as Small does (154)) to compare improvisation with anarchism (that is, in the usually accepted sense of the term, a view that society *should* develop along certain anarchistic lines). If labelled in this way, it is easy to dismiss improvised music itself as an incomplete 'answer' to a 'problem' of social and musical change which it is no part of its purpose to pose or solve.

That is *not* to say improvisation is without objective social significance. I have tried to define improvisation as a form of attention. It is as old as music, but when seen in a historical perspective against the recent cultural resistances to improvisation it clearly amounts to an *expansion* of attention. In improvising, musicians step outside the normal nexus of contractual 'obligations' or artistic 'expectations'. They inhabit a new space, which has not been named and resists naming (155). In Barthes' words, a "praxis without remainder" (156).

(c) Improvisation's Wider Context

"If a man who has taste enough to judge of the products of beautiful art with the greatest accuracy and refinement willingly leaves a chamber where are to be found those beauties that minister to vanity or to any social joys and turns to the beautiful in nature in order to find, as it were, delight for his spirit in a train of thought that he can never completely evolve, we will regard this choice of his with veneration and attribute to him a beautiful soul, to which no connoisseur or lover of art can lay claim on account of the interest he takes in his (artistic) object." Immanuel Kant, **Critique Of Judgement**

Kant was favourably contrasting the experience of nature and the experience

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which would cover artistic production generally) as a means of inserting a gap (whether in time or information space, it does not matter) between signal and response: a means, in other words, of coping with the accelerated flow of information and orders that characterises our society ('An Anthropological Approach To Rhetoric', page 447 in **After Philosophy** edited by Bains, Bowman and McCarthy, the MIT Press, 1987).

(156) **Image-Music-Text** (Essays selected and translated by Stephen Heath) Fontana/Collins 1977, page 153.

(157) **Aesthetic Theory**, trans. C. Lenhardt, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984, pages 115 and 98. The quotation from Kant is at page 94.

(158) See Note 92 above.

(159) For instance, the use of political speeches or of phrases lifted out of context from films or television in Public Enemy's music such as **It Takes A Nation Of Millions To Hold Us Back** (DEF Jam Recordings, 1988).

(160) See recording mentioned in Note 60.

(161) In the Essay 'The Grain Of The Voice' in **Image-Music-Text**. This is an aspect of music to which some of the greatest film directors have been attuned. Robert Bresson expresses this in a beautiful aside: "simultaneous precision and imprecision of music. A thousand possible, *unforseeable* sensations" (**Notes On The Cinematographer**, trans. Jonathan Griffin, Quartet Books, page 57 (Bresson's italics)). Another film director whose films make powerful use of music was Andrey Tarkovsky and he also is alive to a similar quality. In discussing the advantages of the use of electronic (rather than, say, classical) music in his soundtracks he says: "Electronic music has exactly that capacity for being absorbed into the sounds. It can be hidden behind other noises and remain indistinct; like the voice of nature, of vague intimations... it can be like somebody breathing." (**Sculpting In Time: Reflections On The Cinema**, trans. K Hunter-Blair, Bodley Head, 1986, page 163)

of art. However, this delight "in a train of thought" which the observer "can never completely evolve" is a fundamental theme in much improvised music and many other areas of twentieth century art. In other words, what the artistically inclined once perceived as a property of nature, has now come to be perceived as a property of art itself. This is part of a wider process which Theodor Adorno (who quotes the above passage) analyses as the gradual assimilation of art to nature connected with a growing desire for "realising the articulation of the non-human by human means" (157).

One might add that this process goes hand in hand first with an increasing need to assimilate from a human perspective the world of advanced technology (through realising its potential as a source however unwitting for human expression); and secondly an increasing realisation of the complexity of man's own voice, the embedding of the non-human (or at least the non-intended) in the human voice itself.

Put a different way, much of twentieth century art can be seen as a search for the expressive potential of objects, events or processes which in themselves are not generally considered 'expressive' because in whole or in part they are not initiated by human beings seeking self-expression.

To justify these schematic statements would require a book or a number of books. Assuming, however, their provisional plausibility, the significance of improvisation can be seen. The involvement of improvised music in this wider process has emerged at a number of points in this essay and can be presented schematically here:

(1) Starting from standard instruments and their inherited vocabulary, many have explored the complexity which they mask: focusing on complexities whether of melodic line (Evan Parker's achievement of multiple voicing through exploring the overtones produceable on the saxophone), of texture (for instance, Paul Rutherford's solo work) and of harmonic implication (for instance, Derek Bailey). We have also seen how group improvisation can suggest a multiplicity of voices (for instance, in the discussion of King Übü above). Thus new voices are found *within* the voice previously considered to be the appropriate vehicle of 'expression'.

As a parallel, one could consider the work of classical composers such as György Ligeti, Iannis Xenakis or Steve Reich, in which complex processes (of myriad changing harmonies or rhythms changing at different rates) generate new voices emerging as it were unbidden from the cracks in the music.

(2) Alternatively, improvisors have taken as the starting point mute objects themselves, the objects of 'everyday life', and from this direction, the search becomes one for a means of integrating the sounds to which they give rise into musical performance without necessarily assimilating them to pre-established perceptions (158). Thus physical rubbish is deliberately included as part of the musical process, often with a degree of social comment or even a certain nostalgia, such as in the productions of the Bow Gamelan Orchestra.

(3) This last process is naturally extended to what one might call 'cultural rubbish': that is, degraded bits of information or expression or sentiment which can be put to use in the texture of the music. We have seen this in what I called the 'style-mixing' approach. It is present to very different effect in Keith Rowe's eavesdropping on the airwaves in his performances. As a related phenomenon, it is a fundamental feature of the sampling techniques used in hip-hop (159).

(4) The interest in cultural debris can be equally turned inward to an examination of the degraded information or (put more positively) the unintended irregularities in the performer's own 'musical thought' or the physical aspects of performance. On an explicit level, at least this has received more attention in America than in Britain: the American guitarist Davey Williams has gone to "some lengths to formulate appropriate procedures in a subconscious ethnic music" (120). Another musician (again American), the pianist Borah Bergman, has explored the possibilities of total independence of the pianist's hands (160).

What is common to all of this is an expanding awareness, a deepening attention towards the components of any musical articulation, calling into question music's status as a transparent vehicle of expression (emphasising 'genosong' rather than 'phenosong' in the terminology which Roland Barthes adapts from Julia Kristeva (161)). Put another way, it signals a disenchantment with the image of a composer or performer-composer who must intend every musical result, a growing taste for the results of letting things happen during performance (and in the proc-

photo: **Peter Symes**

ess of composition). It is important to realise, however, that there is no natural limit to this expansion of the field of attention: the way sounds form, the way sounds decay, the way one's reaction to repeated sound can change through the process of repetition, the associations that are generated by mixing material of different levels of precision ('human' and 'non-human', 'expressive' and 'non-expressive') — none of these can in principle be excluded from the process.

In a field without obvious limits, improvisation is an important and necessary tool. For, free from the *necessity* to repeat previously prepared material, the performer may choose to widen his or her attention during the performance. In so doing, new possibilities (although they may be small variations only on existing material) are generated which develop there and then "in the moment of listening" as Stockhausen says. It is striking that a film director whose films are noted for the rigour of their construction and their freedom from stale cinematic conventions (Robert Bresson) has acknowledged the role of improvisation in his own work as director (and similarly in that of the amateur actors whom he chooses in his films):

"To place the public opposite beings and things, not as some people place it arbitrarily by acquired habits (clichés), but as you place yourself according to your *unforeseeable* impressions and sensations. Never decide anything in advance... The actor learning his part presupposes a 'self' known in advance (which does not exist)... Shooting. Agony of making sure not to let slip any part of what I merely glimpse, of what I perhaps do not yet see and shall only later be able to see." (162)

There has been no better expression of the virtues of improvisation than this.

Bresson's comments suggest also a wider point. If attention is increasingly attuned to complex processes and the voices that lie hidden within them, improvisation has a more fundamental function than mere assimilation; it is actually a very practical means of *generating* complexity without the elaborate agonies of detailed notation and the translation of that notation into a performance. This involves a 'letting go' within certain parameters, an acceptance that, in order to generate interesting complexity in performance, it is not necessary for each note or attack to be planned. To see its advantages, one need merely ask whether it would be worthwhile for a composer to attempt to achieve through composition the complexity of line and texture which Evan Parker's improvised saxophone solos give shape to and, even if the answer was yes, what would be the point of performing it? It would perhaps be a matter of choice but it would be absurd to assume that because one production would be composed and the other improvised, the former would automatically or even probably deserve greater respect. And yet this is the assumption so often expressed unwittingly by critics. It needs to be better appreciated that a great deal of complexity can be generated through performance without loss of expressive power, when the performer is freed from the need to reproduce complex instructions which he or she has not generated (163).

Another reason why one might prefer to experience a live improvisation rather than a performance of a precomposed piece emerges when one recalls Earle Brown's comment about the barriers between composer and the end-result of musical performance, barriers which by definition are absent in improvisation. For this intimate relationship of the composer (as performer) and the physical production can be an important aspect of what is communicated to the *listener*. I believe it is an essential part of the pleasure which Evan Parker's work gives (and in this he is not unique) that it communicates to the listener a feeling of intimacy with the physical production of sound. Roland Barthes is rare among critics of music in grasping the importance of the body in musical appreciation (both the performer's self-appreciation and the audience's involvement with the music through an attention to the bodily movements of the performer). Barthes does not directly refer to improvisation but without doubt he has tapped into a major source of its power (164). The same point could not be better made than by Lorca in his discussion of *duende*, the sudden access of inspiration which can transform a performance (165):

"All arts are capable of *duende*, but where it finds its greatest range, naturally, is in music, dance and spoken poetry, for these arts require a living body to interpret them, being forms that are born, die and open their contours against an exact present."

We have seen how this basic insight has been consistently betrayed in prac-

(162) *Op. Cit.* page 83 (Bresson's italics).

(163) See the quotation of Stockhausen, **Towards A Cosmic Music**, page 7, cited above. In this context it is worth noting the unapologetic use of improvisation by various American performers who are concerned primarily with various methods of electronic and editing transformation; I am thinking of the guitarists David Myers (**Engines Of Myth**, Arcane Device, 1988) and Jim O'Rourke (**Remove The Need**, a cassette issued by Complacency Productions, 1989) and, in a less direct fashion, the group Mnemonists (see Note 36).

(164) This is the basic truth which underlies the bizarre rhetoric of Herbert Whone's **The Hidden Face Of Music**, Victor Gollancz, 1984.

(165) Federico Garcia Lorca, **Deep Song And Other Prose**, trans. Christopher Maurer, Marion Boyars, 1980, page 47 (from the essay 'Play And Theory Of The Duende'). Stockhausen expresses the same point well but more narrowly when he says that "musicians should bring [the audience] to the essential and more than anyone else musicians can do that, because they are the only artists who can *create in front of other people*... so that they can participate in the creative act" (**Towards A Cosmic Music**, page 6; my italics).

tices which try to censor the involvement of the live performer, to censor even the performer's self-image as anything more than a "machine of a certain sort" (114). Improvisation rejects this censorship.

(d) The Audience

I would like to conclude this essay with some remarks about the audience for improvised music. The remarks are first general and then specific to the British scene.

One might object to much of what I have said that it focuses too much on the performer. I might seem to be saying that provided the performer feels at ease with the musical complexity which improvisation generates, all is well. I have, after all, said little until now about how actual audiences react to improvised music and have been content to put forward *my* views which may be totally untypical.

I hope, however, I have made it clear that communication (freed from the constraints of any irrelevant notions of authority or obligation) is essential to improvisation. That is not to say that any of the music I have analysed is 'easy listening': indeed it is precisely because improvisation takes seriously the communicative capacity of music that it is dissatisfied with any facile approach whether to playing or listening, or the presentation of performance. Equally, it would be foolish to deny that just as improvisation has a role in generating and coping with complexity from the point of view of the composer-performer, so composition can be valuable as a means by which complexity is generated and then communicated to the listener. There is absolutely no reason why an improvisor should not also be a composer and should not exchange those roles at will, any more than one would deny that a composer should also be a listener.

One improvisor and composer who demonstrates emphatically the interchangeability of these roles and who has been very successful in communicating a sophisticated appreciation of sound to a wide audience is the English guitarist, Fred Frith. His work ranges from songs to instrumental compositions to highly abstract improvisations for solo guitar, to work with dance, theatre and film (166). He terms himself an improvisor but his musical production is open to all manner of compositional devices. This includes both the exploration of conflicts between styles and a major contribution to the extension of the resources of the amplified guitar. He is an exemplar of an openness towards new experience which is common to the best of improvisation. That openness points to the future, beyond the misguided hierarchies of the past.

POSTSCRIPT

I hope to have established what improvisation has contributed not just to academic debate but to real conflicts between different forms of musical practice. This contribution is open-ended. Some have claimed that improvisation has 'failed'. However, there can be no such failure simply because improvisation is not bound by any single critical perspective from which 'failure' could be judged; still less could there be a 'history' of failure, for reasons discussed at the outset. Nor can a history of improvised music be usefully written by concentration on specific institutions: improvised music has no such institutions (167).

I hope, however, to have shown how wide and varied a body of music has developed out of free improvisation in Britain and why I at least think it worthy of attention. This view is not shared by the media in Britain. National newspapers, television and radio pay no attention to this area of music, and there are only a few magazines in Britain where ideas of improvisation can regularly be exchanged: namely *Resonance*, *Rubberneck* and *The Wire* (168). Record and tape distribution networks are a small but important compensation for this, but even in this respect Britain lags behind, say, the United States where there are a number of networks providing listeners with access to music which would appear to have no hope of commercial backing (169).

Thus, the British improvised scene has appeared at times to develop almost in a vacuum.

Nonetheless, it remains alive, as is demonstrated by the appearance of new groups on the scene: some examples include the group Morphogenesis which concentrates on electronic sound (170); the instrumental group in which I am involved, Conspiracy (171); Stock Hausen and Walkman (172), a Manchester-based group which uses a range of sampling techniques; Diastolic Murmurs, the duo described in the section **Theatre And Spectacle** (173).

(166) An eloquent film about his music and his way of life has recently been released: **Step Across The Border**, directed by Nicolas Humbert and Werner Pencel. See above, Notes 53 and 79.

(167) It may be possible to argue that this is a virtue of improvised music (and Eddie Prévost has written eloquently on this subject in the articles previously cited). As André Gorz has said (**Critique Of Economic Reason**, page 179): "Society is no longer to be found where it institutionally proclaims its existence... society now only exists in the interstices of the system, where new relations and new solidarities are being worked out and are creating, in their turn, new public spaces..." Compare Victor Turner's theory of "liminoid" activities as a source of social change (**Dramas, Fields And Metaphors**, Cornell University Press, 1974, page 16): "because they are outside the arenas of direct industrial production... their very outsiderhood disengages them from direct functional action on the minds and behaviour of societies' members. To be either their agents or their audience is an optional activity — the absence of obligation or constraint from external norms imparts to them a pleasurable quality which enables them all the more readily to be absorbed by individual consciousnesses. Pleasure thus becomes a serious matter in the context of innovative change."

(168) In the 1970s, however, there were two active magazines, **Microphone** and **Musics**, and **Contact** (as can be seen from references in this essay) carried a considerable amount of informed discussion about improvisation. All unfortunately are defunct.

(169) In 1990 this included David Prescott's label Generation Unlimited, the tape networks of Zan Hoffman and Karl Howard based in Kentucky and New York respectively, and the magazine **Sound Choice** issued in California. But these also have in aprt been superseded.

(170) Morphogenesis comprises Adam Bohman, Clive Hall, Clive Graham, Michael Prime, Roger Sutherland and Ron Briefel. Morphogenesis has issued an LP **Prochronisms**, Sounds Unlimited, 1990.

(171) Conspiracy comprises Adam Bohman (prepared strings and found objects), Andy Hammond (electric guitars), John Telfer (saxes and flute) and myself (keyboards). In 1990 we issued a cassette **The Beaufort Scale** with Barry Edgar Pilcher (saxophone and clarinet).

(172) M Wand, A Sharpley, D Weaver, R Casswell and J Webb, who issued in 1990 **What's Up**, a cassette distributed in a sample-size cereal packet!

(173) Diastolic Murmurs are Adam Bohman and Crow. They have issued a series of cassettes: **Live Electronics Dissections 4/Hyperaesthesia**, **Purgations** (including a live performance at the ICA from 1989) and **Nervenkrankheiten**. Their work has now developed into the performance project **The Institution Of Rot** in which I am also involved (See the section of **Part Two** headed **Theatre And Spectacle**).

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In looking to the future, there is reason to suppose that there may be changes of emphasis. The intense battle that improvisors in the 1960s had to establish any attention at all for their work (whether in the jazz or classical traditions) perhaps left its mark in a certain defensiveness, an emphasis on exclusion or (put more positively) an intense single-mindedness of activity. As the instrumental means (including ready access to sampling and other techniques) develop, the balance may change from a battle against the dictates of standardised harmony or rhythmic rigidities, to a concerted effort to maintain at all costs an openness to other musics and to the constant renewal of the expressive potential of the whole range of inherited music (classical, jazz or rock); in other words, the constant renewal of awareness of the sounds which are everywhere around us.

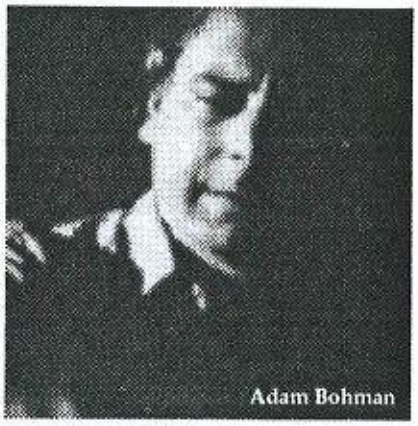
I hope to have demonstrated the range and depth of British improvised music and to have given substance to the claim that free improvisation comprises a significant expansion of musical awareness. For practical and other reasons, it may falter from time to time but it cannot be halted, not least because it is connected with much wider cultural changes as I have also tried to demonstrate.

Yet improvisation is a music particularly vulnerable to misunderstanding: confusions of expectation are caused by the carrying over of assumptions from the pre-packaged music with which we are so comfortable. If improvisation is to flourish as it should, its practitioners must confront these expectations as well as generating more critical debate about what they do (174): this essay is intended as a contribution to that task, following a path already well set by others. The only true measure of its success is whether it encourages others to listen to this music for themselves: for descriptive schemes are always (and should always be) liable to be confounded by further listening.

What is dead, its burial long overdue, is the candid question of the virtuoso classical performer to whom Derek Bailey spoke (175): "How much are you entitled to be free with music?" The answer is obvious: you are free. It is yours and everyone's. **R**

(174) Eddie Prévost makes a similar point about the lack of effective critical debate in his 'Letter To Novosibirsk'.

(175) Quoted in **Bailey**, page 91.



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APPENDIX
Selected Recordings 1990-95

This is not intended as a definitive list or discography — who could claim to write that? It is simply a selection to give a few markers to the range and quality of British improvised music (including collaborations with musicians from other countries) in the 1990s. Occasionally I've included a reissue of a recording from earlier.

Given the high costs of recording, any list will always give only a partial sense of the range of music actually being played.

AMM, **The Nameless Uncarved Block** (Matchless CD,1990)
AMM, **Newfoundland** (Matchless CD 1992)
Arc (Gus Garside, Sylvia Hallett, Danny Kingshill) **Out Of Amber** (Slam CD 1993)
Martin Archer, **The Venona Breaks** (No Music MC 1992)
Ascension (Tony Irving, Stefan Jaworzyn), **Five Titles** (Shock CD 1994)

Derek Bailey, **Solo Guitar Volume 2** (Incus CD 1992)
Derek Bailey, **Drop Me Off At 96th** (Scatter CD 1994)
Derek Bailey/John Stevens, **Playing** (Incus CD 1993)
Derek Bailey/Thebe Lipere/Louis Moholo, **Village Life** (Incus CD 1992)
Bark! (Richard Scott, Rex Casswell, Phil Marks, Andy Denny) **Celibacy** (sruti box CD 1993)
Tony Bevan/Paul Rogers/Steve Noble, **Big Shots** (Incus CD 1992)
Adam Bohman, **Solo** (Polar Bear MC 1994)
Adam Bohman/Paul Obermayer/Nick Couldry, **The Institution Of Rot June 1993** (Vintage MC 1994)
Adam Brett/John Telfer, **Blag** (Snape CD 1991)
Mark Browne, **The Bathos** (Polar Bear MC 1994)
John Butcher, **Thirteen Friendly Numbers** (Acta CD 1992)

Company (Derek Bailey, Alexander Balanescu, Buckethead, Paul Lovens, Vanessa Mackness, Yves Robert, Pat Thomas, John Zorn): **Company Week 1991, Volumes 1 - 3** (Incus 3CDs 1994)
Conspiracy (Adam Bohman, Nick Couldry, Andy Hammond, John Telfer) **Intravenous** (Matchless CD 1992)
Lindsay Cooper/Phil Minton/Alfred 23 Harth (as Trio Trabant A Roma) **State Of Volgograd** (FMP CD 1994)
Mike Cooper/Viv Corringham, **Avant Roots** (Mash CD 1994)
Lol Coxhill/Steve Lacy/Evan Parker, **Three Blokes** (FMP CD 1994)

Elton Dean, **The Vortex Tapes** (Slam CD 1993)
Elton Dean, **Two's And Three's** (Voiceprint CD 1994)
Paul Dunmall, **Quartet, Sextet & Trio** (Slam CD 1994)

Max Eastley/David Toop, **Buried Dreams** (Beyond CD 1994)
Elsie Jo (Barry Guy, Irène Schweizer, Evan Parker, Konrad Bauer, Barre Phillips, Paul Lytton) **Live** (Maya CD 1991)
Ensemble (Chris Burn, John Butcher, Jim Denley, Phil Durrant, Matt Hutchinson, Marcio Mattos, John Russell, Stevie Wishart) **Cultural Baggage** (Acta CD 1991)

Simon H Fell, **Compilation II** (Bruce's Fingers LP 1991)
Firebox (Howard Bevan, Peter Marsh) **Firebox** (Polar Bear MC 1994)
Full Monte (Chris Biscoe, Brian Godding, Marcio Mattos, Tony Marsh) **Spark In The Dark** (Slam CD 1994)
Furt (Richard Barrett, Paul Obermayer) **Furt Logic One, Two And Three** (Vintage 3MCs 1992-94)

Green Room (David Baird, David Garrett, Chick Lyall), **Hidden Music** (Leo Lab CD 1995)
Barry Guy and London Jazz Composers' Orchestra (with Irène Schweizer) **Theoria** (Intakt CD 1993)
Barry Guy and London Jazz Composers' Orchestra, **Portraits** (Intakt CD 1994)

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Barry Guy and the NOW Orchestra, **Study/Witch Gong Game II/10** (Maya CD 1994)
Barry Guy, **Fizzles** (Maya CD 1994)

Sylvia Hallett, **Skimming** (Mash CD 1992)
Andy Hammond/Nick Couldry, **The Music Of Hounds** (Polar Bear MC 1992)
George Haslam (w Paul Rutherford, Howard Riley, Marcio Mattos, Tony Marsh, Liz Hodgson) **Level Two** (Slam CD 1993)
Hession/Wilkinson/Fell (Paul Hession, Alan Wilkinson, Simon H Fell) **foom! foom!** (Bruce's Fingers CD 1992)
Hession/Wilkinson/Fell, **The Horrors Of Darmstadt** (Shock CD 1994)
The Honkies (Andy Diagram, Richard Harrison, Cathy Hulme, Caroline Kraabel) **All My Screws Fell Out** (Megaphone CD 1993)
Ken Hyder/Tim Hodgkinson/Valentina Ponomareva, **The Goose** (Megaphone/Woof CD 1993)

John Jasnoch/Linda Lee Welch (as Skits), **Throwback** (BTT Tapes MC 1991)
Billy Jenkins/Steve Noble/Oren Marshall **Tumba La Casa!** (VOTP MC 1991)
Billy Jenkins (with Steve Arguelles, Steve Noble, Thebe Lipere) **Big Fights Nos. 1 - 3** (VOTP 3MCs 1991)
Billy Jenkins/Steve Noble/Roberto Bellatalla, **The Shakedown Club** (Babel CD 1994)

John Law Quartet (w Alan Wilkinson, Roberto Bellatalla, Mark Sanders) **Exploded On Impact** (Slam CD 1992)
John Law, **Talitha Cumi** (Future Music Records CD 1994)
Tony Levin/Paul Dunmall, **Spiritual Empathy: Duets 1994** (Rare Music CD 1994)
The John Lloyd Quartet (w John Law, Mark Sanders, Paul Rogers) **Head** (Leo CD 1993)

Phil Minton and Roger Turner, **Dada Da** (Leo CD 1993)
Phil Minton and Veryan Weston, **Songs From A Prison Diary** (Leo CD 1993)
Morphogenesis (then comprising Adam Bohman, Clive Hall, Michael Prime, Fred Sansom, Ron Briefel) **Prochronisms** (Sounds Unlimited LP 1990)
Mujician (Keith Tippett, Paul Dunmall, Tony Levin, Paul Rogers), **The Journey** (Cuneiform CD 1992)
Mujician, **Poem About The Hero** (Cuneiform CD 1994)

Maggie Nicols and Pete Nu, **Nicols 'N' Nu** (Leo CD 1994)
Maggie Nicols/Joëlle Léandre/Irène Schweizer, **Les Diaboliques** (Intakt CD 1994)
Steve Noble and Alex Ward, **Ya Boo, Reel & Rumble** (Incus CD 1991)

Organum (David Jackman, Michael Prime, Dinah Jane Rowe, Roger Sutherland, Robert Hampson, Jim O'Rourke, Philip and Richard Rupenus) **Veil Of Tears** (Matchless Recordings CD 1994)
Michael Ormiston and Graeme Scott, **Sonic Winds** (Sonic Productions MC 1992)
The Tony Oxley Quartet (Tony Oxley, Derek Bailey, Matt Wand, Pat Thomas) **The Tony Oxley Quartet** (Incus CD 1993)

Evan Parker and Walter Prati, **Hall Of Mirrors** (MM-TCD 1990)
Evan Parker, **Process And Reality** (FMP CD 1991)
Evan Parker/Alex von Schlippenbach/Paul Lovens, **Elf Bagatellen** (FMP CD 1992)
Evan Parker and John Stevens, **Corner To Corner** (Ogun CD 1993)
Anthony Braxton/Evan Parker/Paul Rutherford, **Trio (London) 1993** (Leo CD 1994)
Evan Parker/Barry Guy/Paul Lytton, **Imaginary Values** (Maya CD 1994)
Evan Parker (w Schlippenbach/Lovens & Guy/Lytton), **50th Birthday Concert** (Leo CD 1994)
Simon Picard/Paul Rogers/Tony Marsh, **News From The North** (Intakt CD 1993)
Pool with Clive Bell (Matthew Armstrong, Clive Bell, David Ross, Richard Scott), **Spring** (sruti box MC 1993-94)
Michael Prime, **Aquifers** (RRR CD 1993)

Howard Riley, **Procession** (Wondrous Recordings CD 1990)

Phil Minton

scan: **Chris Blackford**

Howard Riley and Keith Tippett, **The Bern Concert** (Future Music Records CD 1994)

Slant (crischeek, Phil Jeck, Sianed Jones and featuring Dean Speedwell Broderick, Andy Cotton, Ann Day and Max Eastley) **Slant** (Sound & Language CD 1993)
Something Else (Mick Beck, Simon H Fell, Paul Hession) **Start Moving Earbuds** (Discus/Bruce's Fingers CD 1994)
John Stevens Quartet (w Gary Crosby, Ed Jones, Byron Wallen) **New Cool** (The Jazz Label CD 1994)
Stock, Hausen And Walkman (Rex Casswell, Andrew Sharpley, Matt Wand, Daniel Weaver) **Giving Up With Stock, Hausen And Walkman** (QRM CD 1993)

The Invisible String Quartet (Dave Draper), **Entomic** (Slam CD 1995)
Pat Thomas and Lol Coxhill, **Halim** (nato CD 1993)

Various Artists, **Women With Voices** (Alquimia, Alison Bentley, Polly Bolton, Viv Dogan-Corringham, Mandy Fox, Liz Hodgson, Marion Hammon, Shirley Kent, Vanessa Mackness, Linda Lee Welch, Maggie Nicols, Dorothy Shaw, Julie Tippetts), (Slam CD 1993)
Various Artists, **Pork Scratchings: Excerpts From The China Pig Club 1992-93** (China Pig MC 1994)
Various Artists, **The Saxophone Phenomenon** (Lol Coxhill, George Haslam Liz Hodgson, Elton Dean, Paul Rogers, Mark Sanders, Paul Dunmall, Peter Brandt, Chris Biscoe, Brian Godding, Marcio Mattos, Tony Marsh, Evan Parker, Daniel Harari, Ruben Ferrero, Mono Hurtado, Horacio Straijer, Alan Wilkinson, Simon H Fell, Paul Hession), (Slam CD 1992)

Phil Wachsmann/Phil Minton/Radu Malfatti, **Trio Raphiphi** (ITM CD 1993)
Alan Wilkinson, **Seedy Boy** (Bruce's Fingers MC 1994): with individual artwork for each MC by Gina Southgate. **R**

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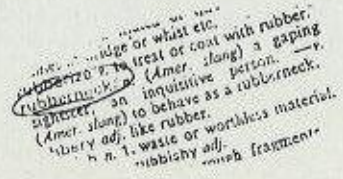
rubberneck
(Amer. slang) a gaping
inquisitive person. —v.
(Amer. slang) to behave as a rubberneck.
rubbery adj. like rubber.
rubbish n. 1. waste or worthless material.
rubbishy adj.

...short ideas repeated
Massage the brain...
Robert Ashley, 1979